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LEGENDARY GAME DEV *John Romero* ON ITS LASTING LEGACY

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RIP AND TEAR IN *SIGIL II*, DOOM'S DIABOLICALLY DEVIOUS NEW CAMPAIGN

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ISSUE 391

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"DOOM'S MOST HELLISHLY WICKED, ADRENALINE-PUMPING EPISODE YET"

John Romero, John Carmack, and the rest of id Software changed the world 30 years ago when they released *Doom*. In a big way, too. In a way that transcended the videogame industry into popular culture and shifted what was imagined possible with the video game medium.

Now, on *Doom*'s 30th anniversary, Romero returns once more to the game that made him one of the most famous game devs in the world. *SIGIL II* is Romero's brand new sixth campaign episode for the game, and its most hellishly wicked, adrenaline-pumping yet.

ROBERT JONES
Twitter
@rnicholasj

This month
Discovered a chainsaw behind a fake wall in PC Gamer Towers. Wore a wicked grin while wielding it for some reason.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

PHIL SAVAGE
Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Ventured into deadly fae realms via a portal he built in the Bath McDonald's toilet. Not seen since.

FRASER BROWN
Twitter
@FraserIBrown

This month
Went barking mad and roamed around PC Gamer Towers on all fours shouting "woof, woof!"

MOLLIE TAYLOR
Twitter
@mollietayy

This month
Wore a series of totally fetch *Fall Guys*-themed Bean outfits. And in *Final Fantasy XIV* she...

LAUREN MORTON
Twitter
@ComradeCupcake_

This month
Dressed as vampire and started planting and watering pumpkins at 1:37am. We're worried.

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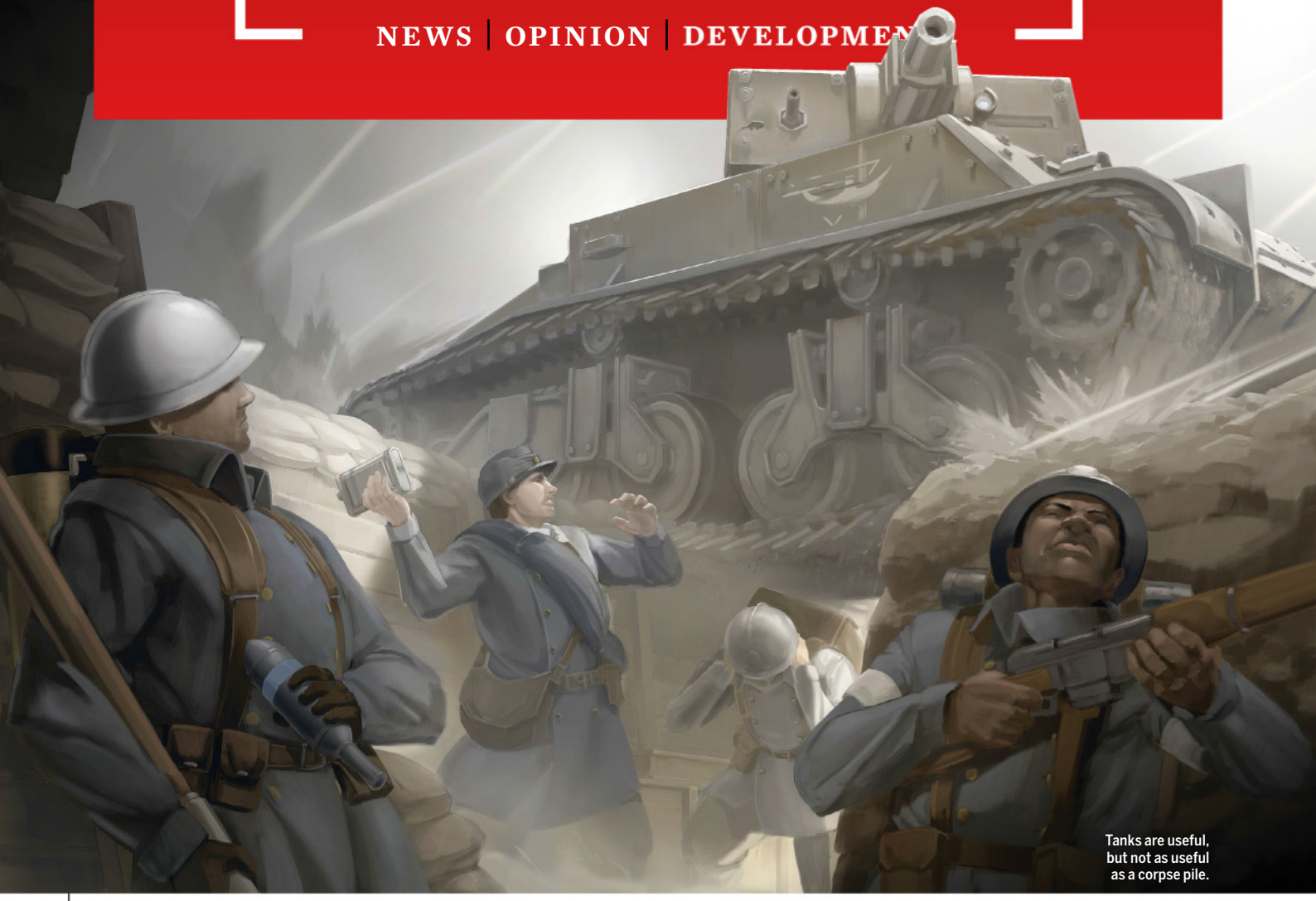


Tanks are useful, but not as useful as a corpse pile.

"PRAISE THE PILE!"

FOXHOLE players battle the odds and build a religion around a corpse pile

F*oxhole* is a sandbox-style war MMO that has been available in Early Access since 2017. The schtick is one persistent and gigantic war game where thousands of players battle for one of two factions, but with the twist that the logistics, resource and supply side of the armies is just as important as firing guns and piloting vehicles.

Like many of the best social games great stories happen as a matter of course, and a recent example was a 48-hour long battle between an isolated island called Silver, cut-off from all logistics support and supplies, facing down an endless invasion force. *Foxhole*'s two factions are the Colonials and the Wardens, and in this case the Colonials held Silver island, part of a larger area called The Oarbreakers Isles.

The Colonials were double-screwed: they were facing superior numbers from an army that could resupply itself, while being cut off from their own supply lines. Silver island had a few silver linings, however: a natural choke point, some basic defences, and four field hospitals that can turn critically wounded soldiers into "shirts", basically respawn tickets. Attackers that landed on the beach quickly ran into withering blindfire from the defenders and "the sandcastle": a winding, interconnected mess of sandbags and barbed wire.

FACING SUPERIOR NUMBERS FROM AN ARMY THAT COULD RESUPPLY ITSELF

THE PILE

Then the defenders, who had no medical supplies to treat their

MONSTER CLICKS

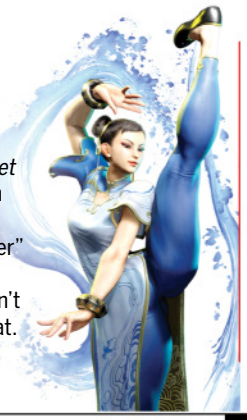
INPUT LATENCY WOES

You can just imagine Alienware's marketing team thinking what's the biggest stunt we can do? The answer happened to be a fully working 16-foot mechanical mouse and keyboard, as used by its esports team to play a round of *Dota 2* with it. Anyone fancy topping that? ■ ***NE***

MOD WARNING

CAPCOM'S MOD ALARM

Remember when a naked Chun-li appeared at a *Street Fighter 6* tournie? Capcom seems to, warning devs of "mods that are offensive to public order" in a recent presentation. Even worse, Capcom reckons that any mod it doesn't officially support is the same as a cheat. Overreaction much? ■ ***JW***



"SIMPLY NOT TRUE"

EXPANSION INNOCENCE

Modern Warfare 3's here, and it's already in hot water. A teeny-tiny campaign spawned murmurs about it being rushed into a full-price package. Sledgehammer Games wants you to know that's "simply not true", despite Bloomberg reports to the contrary. It's studio vs anonymous dev sources. ■ ***HR***

TOP: The battle raged for over 48 real-world hours, crashing the game server.

ABOVE: Finally, after two days of fighting, Silver island entered Warden hands.

wounded, began to worship "the pile". The pile lay outside those hospitals. The Colonial strategy was that all wounded soldiers were to be fatally wounded, in the hope they would become "critically wounded soldiers" to be added to the pile. Field hospitals would turn some of these wounded soldiers into a trickle of respawns.

Warden player Kirbaez was in charge of an attacking boat. "The first thing the [defenders] did after getting back a POW is fucking kill him and when they saw a [critically wounded soldier] they sent someone to collect him screaming, 'For the pile!' As the gremlin scooped the corpse off my barge, I didn't even tell my crew to return fire: I was just in awe."

As the battle raged over 48 real-world hours, the defenders pushed back the attacking boats again and again, regrouping where necessary, rebuilding what they could of "the sandcastle", looting the enemy dead, and most importantly keeping the pile as high as they could.

The battle went on so long and achieved such scale that at one point it crashed the server. But after two days the inevitable happened. Outgunned and outnumbered, the last Colonial defences fell. The dead stayed to spectate as Silver island entered Warden hands. The pile stood tall to the last. ■

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Half-Life Wheee

Valve celebrated the 25th anniversary by adding a bunch of old and new content.

Meaty attack

Baldur's Gate III lets you use sausages as weapons.

Loot shoot

Runescape players realised an old minigame's guards couldn't arrest them all at once.

Epic fail?

Epic's been in court again, this time against Google, as part of which it revealed that the Epic Game Store is still to turn a profit after five years.

Cataclysmic

World of Warcraft Classic is getting the divisive *Cataclysm* expansion.

Un-Embraced

Rumours are swirling that the *KOTOR* remake is on the block.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is used to infiltrating hot environments. Earlier this year, for example, during a hot as hell summer in Ghent, Belgium, The Spy broke into Larian Studios to complete the first solo, one-person-in-party run of *Baldur's Gate III*. And, what's more, The Spy did so while dressed in Larian Studios' founder Swen Vincke's suit of knight's armour.

Following Larian's critical success triumph with *Baldur's Gate III*, though, infiltrating the now multiple award winning studio's inner sanctum has become a lot tougher, and information about its future direction regarding the now much-wanted *Baldur's Gate III* expansion more difficult for The Spy to purloin. The Spy is a master of the stealthy arts, though, and no dexterity check is too high for The Spy to roll. As such, The Spy went to work.

At first The Spy surmised that Larian's CEO would absolutely have the ability to talk to animals, with a history of looking after multiple man's best friends on record, so utilising one of The Spy's world class disguise kits The Spy proceeded to go undercover disguised as Swen's dog, Gustav.

Unfortunately, apart from learning that Gustav likes sausages and sleeping, the only thing The Spy overheard by doggedly following Swen around was that, when asked in interview about the difficulty of doing a high-level expansion for *Baldur's Gate III* due to D&D's crazy high-level spells, he confirmed that in that case, "You could do different things then, so [the DLC] doesn't have to be necessarily at the end of the game. And so there's different ways that you can do that. You could make a level 12-20 game. It's a different game, all right. So you would approach it completely differently. Different stakes, different environments, most likely different protagonists and antagonists. But not undoable."

THE SPY
The Spy taught Alatos 'Ravenscar' Thuibuld everything he knows about infiltration and thievery.

DESCENT INTO AVERNUS

After a few weeks of fighting the dark doggy urges, The Spy's natural spying intuition kicked back in, with The Spy proceeding to dig Underdark deep into a couple of Swen's phrases that stuck out, as well as what The Spy was hearing in the *Baldur's Gate III* rumour mill.

Right now the overriding feeling in PC gaming circles is that the most likely course of a *Baldur's Gate III* expansion will be a continuation and, naturally, culmination of Karlach's origin story, which is left unfinished at the close of the main game. In brief, this would entail Karlach venturing into Avernus, the first layer of the Nine Hells.

AVERNUS SOUNDS A SUITABLY, TO QUOTE SWEN, "DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT"

Avernus sounds a suitably, to quote Swen, "different environment" for a higher-level adventure, while getting Karlach's heart fixed and not dying would absolutely introduce "different stakes" to the main narrative.

Right now nothing has been confirmed by Larian and, quite frankly, The Spy thinks Swen and the rest of the team deserve a very well deserved rest before doing anything else, so The Spy is not expecting news on an expansion soon. But The Spy can confirm conversations are absolutely underway regarding *Baldur's Gate III* DLC within the studio and that Gustav is enjoying plenty of long rests. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Tamriel Rebuilt aims to build a version of *Morrowind* as weird and wonderful as the one 2002's Bethesda would have made.

WORLD BUILDING

The MORROWIND mod that's older than the game itself

Not many mod projects have 122-page chronicles of their own history, but then not many mod projects are *Tamriel Rebuilt*, a mod for *The Elder Scrolls 3: Morrowind* whose aim is to, well, build *Morrowind*. Because in spite of the name, *Morrowind* doesn't actually contain its entire titular province.

Unlike *Skyrim*, the third *Elder Scrolls* restricts you to a relatively minor slice of its main setting: the volcanic backwater island of Vvardenfell. *Tamriel Rebuilt* wants to fill in the gaps. And it's been doing that, slice by slice, for over 20 years.

Paradoxically, *Tamriel Rebuilt* is older than *Morrowind* itself. Its origins go back to 2001, when a poster on The Elder Scrolls Forums enlisted the community to rebuild all of Tamriel, the entire continent that TES happens on, in the then-upcoming game. The project's focus would later narrow, but it wasn't a smooth start.

"The earliest history of *TR* was all about reeling from one crisis to another," says project historian Sultan of Rum. "We've had coups, schisms, near-death experiences, years upon years of scrapped work, bad PR, scammers and impersonators – you name it".

"Probably the most dramatic crisis in *TR*'s history" unfurled in 2003, in an "escalating series of confrontations between the core team and several camps of developers with different opinions on how much the core team can and should direct and edit the work of individual developers". In other words: civil war.

TOWERFALL

The problem was *Silgrad Tower*, described by Sultan as "a huge early mod which had joined into *TR* in 2002 but that still operated almost as its own separate project". Issues arose when *TR*'s leadership tried to nudge *Silgrad Tower*'s vision in a more lore-friendly direction. Devs resented the intrusion. Vocally.

"It's tough to figure out exactly what happened," says Sultan, despite their encyclopaedic knowledge of the mod's history. The lack of surviving archives makes the whole affair murky, but one thing is certain "the two camps split".

The dispute was rancorous – a swathe of project history went up in smoke when *TR*'s forums were angrily deleted – and the fracas poisoned *TR*'s reputation for years. It only recovered following the release of its first expansion in 2006. "It's hard to be angry at a dev team who has just freely released an expansion a quarter of the size of the original game," said Sultan.

At times, the project's survival feels like a bonafide miracle. *Silgrad Tower* was followed by an event known as "the Great Self-Decapitation": a period wherein *TR*'s

Missing makers

The naïve dev who kicked off *Tamriel Rebuilt* in 2001 was a TES Forums user named Ender, but he hasn't been seen since 2006. In fact, not a single dev remains from the project's original core team, and several of its most active members only joined in the relatively recent past. Curiosity abounds about where their predecessors vanished to.

EXPANSION PACKED

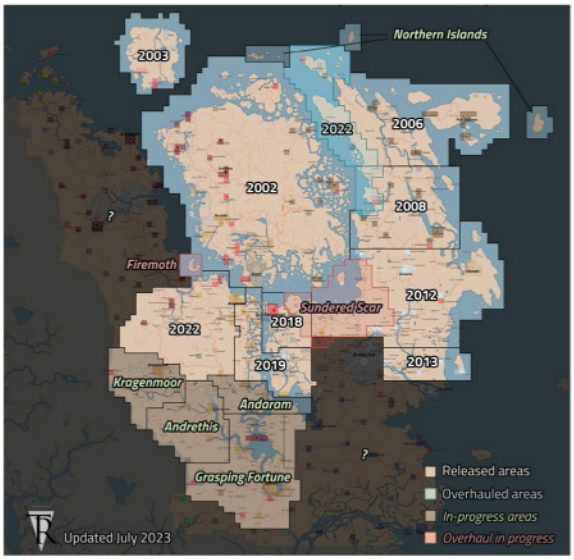
An evolution in expansions

EXPANSION #1: TELVANNIS 2006
TR's first expansion dropped five years after the project started, saving its reputation after the *Silgrad Tower* furore.

EXPANSION #4: OLD EBONHEART 2018
Three expansions and twelve years after *Telvannis*, *Old Ebonheart* overhauled Tamriel Rebuilt's development.

EXPANSION #7: EMBERS OF EMPIRE 2022
Released alongside expansion #6, *Embers of Empire* beefed up *Morrowind*'s western lands. It's the most recent expansion.

EXPANSION #8: ANDARAM 20??
TR's next planned expansion is *Andaram*, which will take the project further south than it has ever been.



LEFT: A map showing *Tamriel Rebuilt*'s completed and planned expansions. It's been a long road.

BELOW: It's an old engine, but *Morrowind*'s environments can still get hyper-complex.

"implement first, ask questions later" philosophy led to the team having to jettison thousands of hours of work on Almalexia, *Morrowind*'s capital.

Almalexia had been in development for years, and suffered from the quality issues that afflicted the mod's earliest sections. Plus, it inexplicably contained 47 statues, a crime against both aesthetics and graphics cards. It had to be remade, which took hundreds of hours. Then the remake had to be trashed and remade again. Many veterans quit.

"The trouble was," says Sultan, "they all independently decided to do that at around the same time," leaving around five people, total, working on *TR* by early 2016. Without meaning to, the project had cut off its own head.

"WITHOUT MEANING TO, THE PROJECT HAD CUT OFF ITS OWN HEAD"

CITIZENS OF MORROWIND

The project was saved in no small part by an "explosion" in *Morrowind* modding. Despite its age, *Morrowind* pulls in new people constantly, and devs enter and leave *TR* with stunning regularity. Not a single dev remains from the 2001 core team, and yet the *TR* Discord is a hive of activity and new faces.

The "constant influx of new people with new ideas and new techniques means the output of the team is never the same week on week," says senior developer Jack, and the project's "open dev structure" creates an environment where any onlooker can take part.

It can make stability a luxury, though. Old devs leaving can lead to *TR* failing "The bus test," says Jack, "If a select few people ever got hit by a bus the project would be toast."

On the flipside, a flow of fresh eyes can mean a constant impulse to revise old content, which can leave others feeling like they're spinning their wheels. Sultan says the "current, fragile consensus" is to prioritise new content but to slowly chip away at the old, but there are always devs who want to go a different way.

Eventually, the team wants to "significantly overhaul all of the parts of *Morrowind* that we released up to 2013, so about half of all the land in the released mod today". That's 12 years of work.

It could be the start of a new civil war, but somehow I think they'll do it. When team members speak about what keeps them going, they all say the same thing: *Morrowind* is an incredible game. Despite Bethesda's subsequent releases, the passion for *Morrowind* in particular is still there.

"[*Morrowind*'s] got this melancholy to it that really sucks you into the vibe and the density of the lore," says Jack, "The fan base being so dedicated to expanding on that despite all the years is the cherry on top to me. There's not a lot of games like it in that respect."

"I think that's what's so wonderful about all mod projects," says Jack, "It's simply a collaboration of dozens of people who love the game so much they're willing to pour a huge amount of time and effort into making more of it for people to enjoy for free... the fact that even a game as old as *Morrowind* still gets a regular influx of people wanting to create for it blows my mind, so I'm always ready to help them learn how to do it." ■

Joshua Wolens

BUILDING CHARACTERS

KARINA BASTOS on being a freelance 3D character artist in the game industry

A longtime fan of anime and manga, Karina Bastos always knew she wanted a creative career, but wasn't sure exactly what; until, that is, she saw what games had to offer. "I started to see how videogames help you bring to life things that [were previously only] on paper," she says.

Brazil offers little in the way of major game development studio work, so she began by taking advantage of mobile and marketing artwork opportunities. This gave her a chance to experiment with different types of art, and she found herself particularly drawn to character work – so that's what she began to specialise in.

Bastos is keen to point out that, while the early part of her career working on smaller projects allowed her a hand in design, generally speaking 3D character artists are interpreting concept art. "You don't do your concepts most of the time," she explains. "You have to know how to work in a team, and don't let your ego get in the way, because there are people doing the design and the concepts for your work. It's about the 3D version of the character; and that's OK, that's your job."

One of the games Bastos has created character models for is *Fortnite*. As you would expect for such a mammoth force in the industry, the company structure is very organised and rigid, with the concept art created separate from the 3D modelling department. Still, there may be occasional opportunities for the modellers to add their own flourish.

The basic idea is always for the 3D model to match the 2D concept as closely as possible, but precisely how that works can vary depending on the scope of the project. While the *Fortnite* team generally assigns one character model to one artist, other studios might have multiple people working on one character.

MODEL EMPLOYEE

"Sometimes some people do the hair, some people do the clothes; then in the end, we come together. Or sometimes I do the high poly, then pass to someone else to do the low poly and texture." Details and textures can and will impact the wider game performance, in fact, so just how lavish or economical each model is will depend on the available resources.

Bastos enjoys the entirety of the character model creation process, but particularly enjoys creating faces and hair. Even something as simple as a character's hair, in fact, requires more thought than you might expect. If the hair will be individually animated, or if the hair model will be shared between different characters, Bastos needs to bear that in mind when creating the character model.

She's also worked on games using licences such as Naruto and Samurai Jack. With characters that have an established, distinctive and protected look, models need to be approved by the licence holders, and there are more rules than usual about their creation too. Another licensed project that Bastos worked on was very different; creating a model of the character Leo Sporino for VR boxing game *Creed: Rise to Glory*.

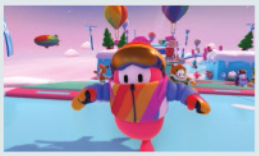
Unlike everything else mentioned above, this character was based on a real person playing a part in a movie. "That was really interesting," Bastos says, "because it was my first time doing that. The brief was to do a likeness of the guy, but matching the style of the game, which was nice – not really very realistic. Faces are really hard to do, because you know that person, you've seen that face! You have to try to match the face with the style of the game."

As a freelancer, Bastos comes by work a few different ways. Sometimes clients will find her via Artstation or her portfolio – but usually, she needs to make the approach, showing her interest and her talent. Dream clients she hasn't yet worked for include Blizzard and Riot, who had a major impact on her early career. ■

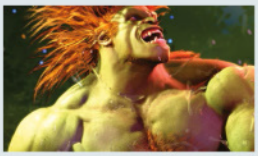
Luke Kemp

3D OR NOT 3D

Some unforgettable character models



FALL GUYS
Their distinctive look means you're happy to see them fail again and again.



STREET FIGHTER
The series has been in 3D so long, it's hard to imagine these absolute units going back to 2D.

BATMAN
The 3D worlds of the *Arkham* games need a 3D Batman to go around smashing heads in them.

THE DARK PICTURES
Supermassive Games has always done great 3D representations of the actors it uses in its stories.

BASTOS ENJOYS THE ENTIRETY OF THE CHARACTER MODEL CREATION PROCESS

Naruto to Boruto: Shinobi Striker was Karina's first experience working on a triple-A game.

ABOVE: *Samurai Jack: Battle Through Time* also enjoyed Bastos on the 3D character artist team.

LEFT: Bastos helped create some of the many character models in industry behemoth *Fortnite*.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

ALONE IN THE DARK

RELEASE January 16, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Pieces Interactive

Psychological horror meets Southern Gothic in a love letter to the ground-breaking original game. Jodie Comer and David Harbour lead the voice cast.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

RELEASE January 18, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montpellier

Everyone's favourite parkour-ing prince is back in an explosive new action-adventure platformer. Time and space are yours to manipulate.

TEKKEN 8

RELEASE January 26, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco Studios

The legendary fighting game series returns with a new game kickstarting a whole new saga of fisticuffs. Visuals have been completely redesigned.

3 months

PACIFIC DRIVE

RELEASE Q1, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ironwood Studios

Drive to survive in this run-based driving adventure. Scavenge resources from the anomaly-filled Olympic Exclusion Zone, upgrade your car and complete missions.

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS. Incoming in February 2024.

NIGHTINGALE

RELEASE February 22, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Inflexion Games

Explore, craft, fight and survive in dangerous Fae Realms either on your own or with friends. You play as a Realmwalker in this visually punchy fantasy world.

6 months

ARK 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Studio Wildcard

The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped once more, out of 2023 and into 2024. We were impressed with it at this year's Gamescom, though, so keep the faith.

FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

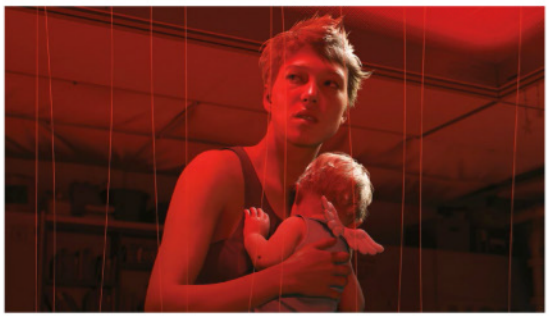
We were intrigued by the sequel to the hit society survival game, *Frostpunk*, at Gamescom. Difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player in this grim world.

12 months+

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from *Everybody's Gone to the Rature* dev The Chinese Room, and there's even a trailer.



DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Piranha Games Inc

Fight for freedom in 100 tons of death-dealing fury. Pilot a huge stompy mech, customise it as you see fit, and enjoy new narrative rich missions.

NEW MOD

RIDING SHOTGUN

If you've been digging back into *Cyberpunk 2077* now that its 2.0 patch and *Phantom Liberty* expansion is out, but still can't get enough of Johnny Silverhand, then a new mod by talented modder deceptious allows the rocker to spawn in the passenger seat of your car, riding around with you in Night City. Preem! Grab the mod here: shorturl.at/hmulL

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Feb 22, 2024 (Early Access)	Inflexion Games	In-house	playnightingale.com

NIGHTINGALE

What's on the cards for the next big survival game?

The bones of the survival genre are well defined. You cut a tree to get sticks. You hit a rock to get flint and stone. You open a crafting menu and turn these things into tools and weapons and a campfire. Is that a critter in the distance? Harvest its meat for food and its skin for leather.

Whether it's *Valheim* or *Ark* or even *Minecraft*, the skeleton remains the same – instantly recognisable, like a T-rex in a museum. The question, then, is what else is going on? What meat is clinging to those bones? What skin is holding it together? *Valheim* has vikings, *Ark* has dinosaurs, and *Nightingale* has fae.

Set in 1889, in an alternate history where humans coexist with magical creatures, *Nightingale* opens with disaster. A toxic miasma, known as The Pale, descends on the Earth. The only city free of the deadly fog is Nightingale, kept safe thanks to an ancient contract with the fae. In the opening moments, you're cast adrift in the portal network linking humanity to the fae's realms. Your goal: find your way to Nightingale.

First, though, you'll be journeying through the realms – exploring the worlds of fairies and spirits and rabbit/lizard hybrids whose skin you can use to make a cape. You can fashion the materials you collect into crude items directly from the crafting menu, but it will wear out quickly. Higher quality tools will, of course, require a crafting bench. Even based on a short preview, the general flow of crafting feels extensive. There are a number of building options and styles, as well as advanced tools and weapons with magical effects. Even the workbenches you make can be enhanced by the items you place near it in a way that makes it easy to picture the ever-expanding to-do list. Gather materials to build a whetstone to enhance my weapons so I'm better able to fight monsters that drop what I need for the next big upgrade project.

It's the tried and true formula that's helped make the genre so absurdly satisfying. But in *Nightingale*, getting access to the resources you need for better equipment means exploring new biomes and hunting of different creatures. Finding materials won't always be a matter of picking a random direction and hoping for the best. Instead, you'll build your own portal and travel to a new realm.

MAJOR AND MINOR CARDS CAN FURTHER TWEAK THE SETTINGS OF THE REALM

BIG TRICK

Nightingale's big trick is its realm card system – letting you generate new worlds based on the cards you add to your portal. A biome card will define the type of environment you're travelling to, and thus the flora and fauna that you might encounter. Then, major and minor cards can further tweak the settings of the realm – how hostile the creatures are, what weather you'll encounter and so on. Here you have a chance to tailor the experience to the resources you need to collect. If the next recipe on your wishlist requires materials from a creature that only appears during the night on a specific biome, for instance, you can pair that biome card with an endless night modifier, drastically increasing your chances of finding it. How many cards you can play will depend on what type of portal you're using. A human built portal – one you've crafted yourself – can only take a certain number of cards. But fae portals you find in the wild can take an unlimited amount, allowing for greater customisation of your destination.

NEW INFO

In the demo I'm shown, the devs head off to a desert biome. Each realm has its own environmental pressure. Deserts, you'll be surprised to learn, are hot. That means players will want to build a shelter to protect themselves from the sun to regenerate health and stamina. As with items, you can build crude structures

directly from your UI – laying down blueprints for walls and platforms, and then adding materials to them to construct them into the world. Everything snaps together nicely, which should make it easy to construct a decent hideaway.

Suitably rested, we get back to exploring the desert – taking care to avoid a pack of elephants who can become aggressive if disturbed. Not all of the creatures you meet in *Nightingale* are hostile by default, and some of the more powerful fae can even be left offerings. If a fight does break out, *Nightingale*'s combat appears basic but functional, with an attack and a special move defined by the weapons you have equipped. Wield a dagger, and you can quickly dodge away from attacks. Take a pickaxe, and you can block instead. You have a health and a stamina bar, which both function as you'd expect, but also a third meter to take care of, hope. Hope controls how quickly your health and stamina can regenerate, so it pays to stave off despair.

Replenishing hope requires building an estate – a home realm that you can return to and develop across the course of a game. As we activate the portal to the realm, though, we're ambushed by The Bound, weird little goblin-like creatures wearing what appears to be bondage gear. They're a fae creation that exist between the realms, and you'll occasionally need to defeat a pack of them to progress.

Picking a home realm requires placing down an estate marker, letting you set a respite point that you can return to at any time. While an ad-hoc structure may be simple, estates are a chance to flex your construction creativity. There are different tilesets that are designed to fit neatly together, and, if you're playing in a party, all members will be able to help with the construction of your estate. I'm reminded of my time in *Valheim*, slowly building up a base camp on a shared server with friends. Here, construction seems a bit simpler and more varied – although a lot will depend on the resource cost of the more decorative tilesets.

ELEMENTAL WEAPONS

We skip forward, and the devs show off a character carrying more advanced equipment. They're armed with a bolt-action rifle, a selection of ammo of different elemental types, clothing that provides a variety of attribute bonuses, and a spyglass for getting a better look at what's lurking in the distance. They're also carrying an umbrella, which in *Nightingale* doubles up as a glider. The reason they're so dressed up? To take down a sun giant.

THERE ARE DIFFERENT TILESETS THAT ARE DESIGNED TO FIT NEATLY TOGETHER

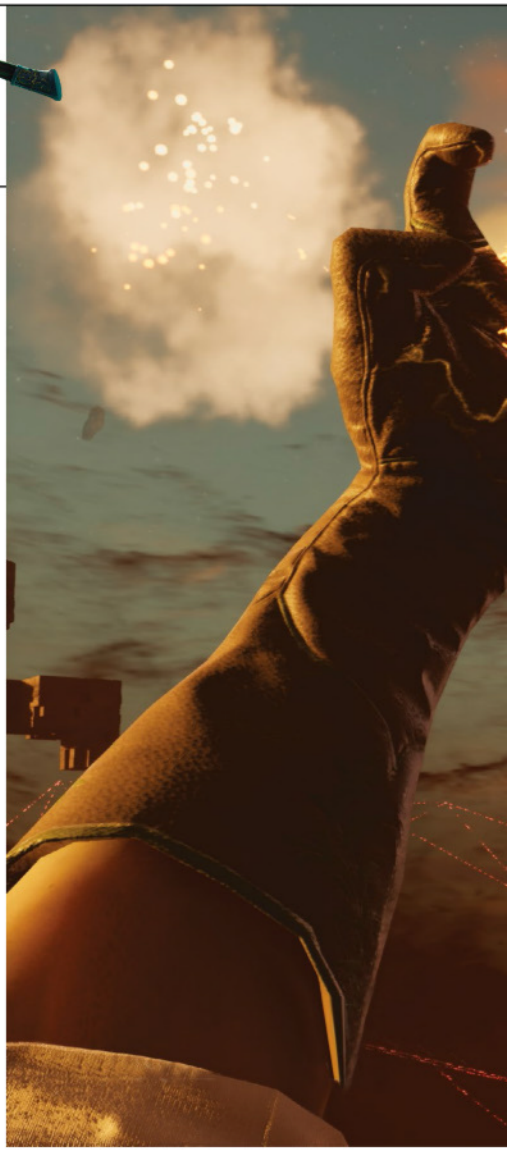
The giant is one of *Nightingale*'s apex-level creatures – major threats that can put up a major fight. We see a team of fully equipped developers team up to take the sun giant now. First, though, they have some time to prepare. Apex creatures aren't hostile by default, which means the players are free to get the surrounding area ready for the upcoming fight. As the fight is taking place in a swampy realm, building crude platforms will give the players somewhere dry to stand. You'll move more slowly in water – unless you have gear that mitigates this disadvantage – but even worse, the environmental pressure of swamp biomes is pockets of diseased water. Stand in them, and it's possible to contract a disease, which isn't an ideal thing to have to manage when a giant is also bearing down on you.

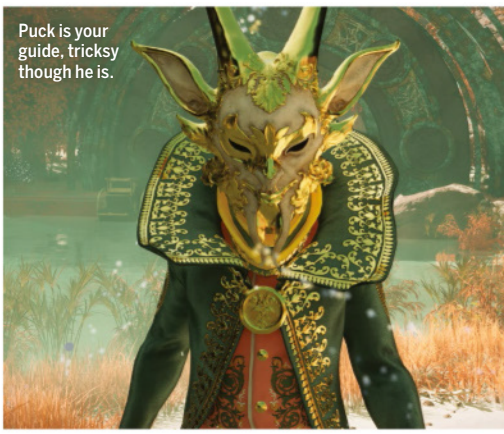
With the swamp suitably covered, the devs also build sniper towers to get an advantageous position over the hulking target. They don't last long. One of the players leaves the giant an offering – some random trash in their inventory. Naturally, the sun giant isn't too pleased with this gift, and so the player responds by shooting him in the head. It's on.

The sun giant is both big and magical. It can smash, yes, but also shoot a magical laser that burns anything it hits. The sniper towers don't last long under the pressure of the giant's attacks. He's also a collector of automaton cards which drop when he's killed, for use in future portals. Here, though, it means that he can summon little robots to help.

Still, the players have some tricks too. An axe imbued with magical abilities is able to hold the automatons in place, relieving some of the pressure. That lets the players concentrate more on the sun giant, using elemental fire ammo to attack his two main weakspots. It's still a tough fight – one I don't think the developers would have survived if they weren't using god mode. And it's one that gives me hope that *Nightingale*'s end game – with its advanced tools and gear – will make for a rich take on survival game progression, even for its Early Access launch in February.

Phil Savage





Puck is your guide, tricksy though he is.

ABOVE: It's a sun giant. And he's a bit miffed.

LEFT: Ready to take on the fae wilds in style.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
£16.75	Samar Studio	Samar Studio	www.playthefront.com

THE FRONT

The Front's ambitions are buried under generic survival cruft

My first dozen hours with *The Front*, a multiplayer survival crafting sandbox recently launched into Early Access by Singapore-based Samar Studio, have been a rollercoaster of emotions, at least half of those being disappointment. Despite a promising sci-fi war premise, too much of it feels dispassionately cribbed from its peers.

The Front's store page promises an open world time travel adventure and a war against a tyrannical empire. What you actually get from the current Early Access build (just over a month from launch at the time of writing) is an unpolished fusion of elements from *Rust*, *Ark: Survival Evolved* and bits borrowed from *Orcs Must Die* and *Fortnite*'s Save The World campaign.

PLAYED IT

With no story to speak of and a bare-bones tutorial, the goal of *The Front* is to establish yourself as top dog on your chosen server before its next scheduled reset. Gathering, researching, fighting cyber-zombified NPCs (or players) and developing weapons and vehicles to enable an advance inland in search of tougher fights and better loot.

So far, so standard for the genre. *The Front*'s quirkiest twist is an optional tower defence minigame of sorts. Build a monster spawn point, an objective that they're trying to destroy, and a trap maze between those two points in order to clear out increasingly tough waves of monsters. Complete a round and you get a fat sack of crafting gubbins, making combat (defensive or raiding NPC strongholds) the optimal route, rather than punching trees.

THE GOAL OF THE FRONT IS TO ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS TOP DOG ON YOUR CHOSEN SERVER

WORLD WAR GRUG

Sadly, you'll be punching trees anyway. Players start as nearly-naked Neanderthals, bashing rocks together to build huts and spears. A couple players working together can be toting semi-auto pistols, double-barrel shotguns and driving around vehicles within an afternoon, making the evolution from caveman to *Counter-Strike* relatively rapid. Given the game's focus on modern-day military might (including fully equipped unmanned tanks just spawning around the world ready to be driven), I'm left wondering why there's even a caveman phase at all.

All it does is make the climb back to modernity all the more painful when you have to do it. And if you're on a PvP server, you absolutely will. Inspired by Rust and other cutthroat sandboxes, PvP in *The Front* is no holds barred. Everything you build can be destroyed by others, and your character remains helpless and sleeping in the world when you log out. The only saving grace is that you get to assign a four-hour window where your property (and body) is fully at risk, although changing that takes some time to come into effect.

If you've got enough players in your group online to defend it during that period, you might do OK, but smaller groups should expect their homes bulldozed on the regular, and your sleeping bodies pillaged for loot.

Tech-wise, the game isn't doing great either. Top-tier PCs chug in areas dense with player-made structures. Servers boasting sub-30 pings feature warping, stuttering NPCs, the sun occasionally strobes in the sky and trees often hover several feet above the ground.

With its player counts already declining, reports of cheaters and a seemingly never-ending list of rough edges, it's hard to recommend *The Front* as it stands now. If Samar can build on its strengths and buff out the technical problems, its military escalation holds potential, but for now, most of what's on offer here has been done elsewhere and better.

Dominic Tarason

On PvE servers, it doesn't take long to build a wind-powered industrial facility.

ABOVE: Sometimes, enemies are mindless and zombie-like. Other times, they're just filthy farmers.

FAR LEFT: And sometimes they're just praying in church. Are... are we the baddies?

Beast

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024	False Prophet	False Prophet	shorturl.at/jHRS7

BEAST

This mad grimdark tactical RPG let me become a satanic Wolverine

When I first embraced my inner-demon in medieval tactical RPG *Beast*, I was not expecting to become a kind of satanic, horned Wolverine, ripping enemies to shreds with razor-sharp claws. My foes were equally surprised, as blood spurted out of their veins with comic book exaggeration. As I dashed around the gridless map, the miserable setting – a dimly-lit village ravaged by plague and war – and grim violence was undercut by my character's howls and barks. "Woof woof woof!" I yelled as I cut down another soldier.

Despite the laughs elicited by the barking protagonist – a war veteran returning home after a decade of Ottoman slavery – *Beast* is a deliberately miserable game. Anti-hero Anton is a gloomy, scarred and vengeful lad, and after a hellish ten years he's come back to Carpathia during what's basically an apocalypse. Nobody is having a good time.

Beast has launched in Early Access during an enduring flood of tactical RPGs, many of them leaning into similar grimdark themes. Like others, including the *Darkest Dungeon* series, it reflects the pressures of conflict and the stresses placed upon Anton thanks to the horrors he regularly witnesses with an "insanity system". The impact of this system, however, and the way you can manipulate it are what sets this tactical RPG apart.

See, when Anton's insanity meter reaches its zenith, he becomes a font of rage, allowing you to activate his most dangerous ability: transforming him into the aforementioned satanic Wolverine. He ditches his swords and guns, instead slaughtering with his demonic claws and his supernatural strength and speed. On top of this, he can teleport directly to enemies and attack them in a single move, or intimidate them, stopping them from using an action that turn by pointing at them and giving them a stern talking to – scary stuff!

DIFFERENT CLASSES HAVE, ALONG WITH THEIR SPECIFIC WEAPONS, SPECIAL ABILITIES

BARKING MAD

This system is very much under your control, as specific things raise and lower the meter. Dealing and taking damage is a surefire way to get the meter up, and it's not just enemies who you can batter. When an ally is downed, for instance, you can finish them off by executing them instead of saving them, embracing the dark side. If you choose to heal them instead, Anton's rage starts to dissipate, which can be helpful if you want to use your ranged weapons.

The one element of the insanity system that doesn't quite make sense, in part because it comes with no explanation, is how it also gives enemies new abilities. I'd get it if going beast mode made you, say, vulnerable to specific attacks, because you favoured offence over defence, but I can't figure out a logical reason why the meter going up would empower your foes and give them new ways to thwart your mission.

PLAYED IT

Otherwise, *Beast* sticks to familiar mechanics: overwatch, different levels of cover, attacks of opportunity – you know the score by now. Different classes have, along with their specific weapons, special abilities, allowing them to make multiple attacks with some accuracy penalties or strike an enemy while gaining a defensive bonus. So far, abilities that deal extra damage seem like the least helpful ones, as I've encountered few enemies that can't be taken out instantly by a single basic attack. The defensive and utility abilities, however, prove more useful since you're often swarmed by foes, and allies can go down swiftly.

More than a few times I've been skipping through a mission without a care in the world, only for a pack of enemies to burst out of a door or alley,

quickly surrounding my carefree party, rapidly transforming the fight into a stressful fight for survival. This is where scouting becomes so important: even if you think you've got a clear path to the objective, you almost certainly don't. You won't survive unless you start sending canaries into the mine.

OLD DOG

Characters benefit from passive abilities, too, determined by both their class and background. This allows some characters to counterattack, while others can heal for a percentage of the damage they've inflicted. A lot of the starting abilities are surprisingly powerful, turning everyone into a deft killing machine, and every character comes with a fairly meaty ability tree with a mix of passive and active abilities, so your allies are not just throwaway minions. This makes the choice to execute them to raise your insanity meter a riskier proposition.

Instead of an *XCOM*-style non-linear campaign, *Beast* throws you into missions one after another, sandwiched between cutscenes. There's also a second story running parallel to Anton's, where you're controlling a rebellious prince and his mates. Unfortunately, it all flows together terribly, at first, with missions that are too short and a narrative that doesn't feel cohesive.

This does improve once you're out of the opening section, however, and this is also where *Beast* starts throwing in some management wrinkles. After around six missions, you'll finally get to customise Anton, picking a premade class and background, or making more granular choices. You can start recruiting soldiers, too, and equipping them with loot pinched from the battlefield between each mission.

There's a spot of resource management from this point on, as your ammunition and healing items will run out quickly and won't be replenished automatically. This balances out the brutal effectiveness of ranged weapons. It's very tempting to wipe out enemies before they can close the gap, but that might leave you vulnerable in your next mission. Guns in particular, then, are to be used sparingly, and come with other downsides, like the need to reload after every shot, wasting an action point.

IT'S VERY TEMPTING TO WIPE OUT ENEMIES BEFORE THEY CAN CLOSE THE GAP

MAN'S BEST FIEND

Even in a short space of time I encountered a solid variety of objectives amid these battles, from castle escapes to protecting wagons to rescuing pals, which will hopefully grow even more diverse once developer False Prophet expands beyond the current 20-mission roster. It's a good foundation, but what it really needs more than anything else is lots and lots of polishing.

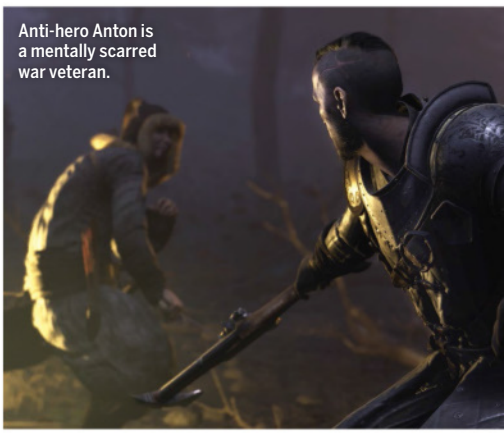
Which, of course, is a major part of why any game goes into Early Access, which *Beast* did on October 25, 2023. By getting gamers to go hands-on with a game is often a great way of identifying issues or, often, cool things that would make the game even better. Just look at how Larian Studios had *Baldur's Gate III* in Early Access for multiple years while developing the game. PC gamers can totally accept a work-in-progress project, but striking that balance between something that's actually playable while still being rough around the edges is key.

"As this is truly an alpha version of the game (which means actual early code) there is a lot of stuff planned to be implemented, fixed, updated, balanced and optimised before full release," warns the developer. And yeah, it is certainly a bit rough. Character animations are sluggish, with awkward pauses between actions, and the cinematic finishers frequently see characters clipping through each other. Audio, meanwhile, is all over the place, requiring me to constantly raise and lower the volume. I'm already getting really sick of the UI, too, which lacks clarity and demands too many extra clicks while offering too little feedback.

But *Beast* also delivers fun right now, too, with its brutal combat as well as squad and resource management ticking boxes for me. With some refinement this is definitely a game I could see putting plenty more hours into.

Right now False Prophet says it's "committed to 2024" as a release window for *Beast*, so the game is expected to leave Early Access in a matter of months rather than years. In the meantime, there's good times to be had here, both when it comes to the violent scraps and the squad management. I'd hold off taking it for a spin until it's had a bit more time to stew, however. Give it a few updates first.

Fraser Brown

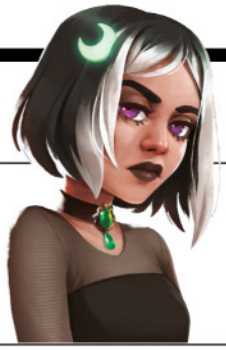


Anti-hero Anton is a mentally scarred war veteran.

ABOVE: That feeling when you realise PC Gamer magazine is sold out.

LEFT: Swords, guns and, yes, claws are some of the weapons at your disposal.

Moonlight Peaks



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024	Little Chicken	Little Chicken	shorturl.at/dvBC9

MOONLIGHT PEAKS

A vampire farm sim that let's you decorate your property

A perfectly bite-sized treat for those who like things that go bump in the night, *Moonlight Peaks* is a cosy farm sim in which you're a vampire, and occupy your time in the darkness for all eternity by foraging, farming, potion brewing, spellcasting and decorating, before then of course taking glam photos of your haunted house and wider estate.

PLAYED IT

For this preview demo build of *Moonlight Peaks* I'm confined to my property, so there will be no checking out the wider town or meeting the local supernatural crew who will be available in the full release, but there's plenty to do on my farm regardless. The first order of business, as ever, is planting a couple crops. *Moonlight Peaks* get points in my book for making it pumpkins instead of parsnips, which I've now planted in far too many farm sims.

I'm also set up with an upgraded set of tools in the demo so I can easily chip away at all the large trees, rocks, and iron veins on my property that I'd presumably have to wait a while to tackle in the full release. I've got a lot of freedom to pick up and move all the pieces of my property as I see fit, from pathways to decor to the pre-built cursed chicken coop I was equipped with in the demo. The real star of *Moonlight Peaks* so far though is the spellcasting and potion brewing.

With my wand I can cast spells for automatically watering my crops, moving trees without cutting them down, and making my crops mature faster. The spellcasting minigame, which has me follow the movements of a cursor around a circle, is just a smidge tricky on a gamepad, but it's quick and catchy as minigames go. I imagine the full release will have some kind of magic meter to prevent infinite spellcasting but I didn't seem to have any restrictions in the demo. To create potions, I have to grow magical herbs like Googly Garlic and Glow Ginger to combine into brews that give me infinite stamina for one night or increase crops gathered for a time.

WITH MY WAND I CAN CAST SPELLS FOR AUTOMATICALLY WATERING MY CROPS

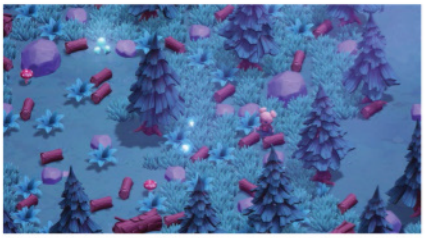
SUCKER

Because I'm a vampire, my farm day begins at 4pm and ends at 6am, and the cute and spooky nighttime aesthetic of *Moonlight Peaks* makes a great first impression. Aside from my nocturnal schedule, I don't get to anything particularly vampire-y in this demo aside from transforming into a bat form whose secret-area-unlocking purposes aren't showcased while stuck on my farm. Later on in *Moonlight Peaks*, the developers say I'll "unlock powerful vampire abilities" like enhanced senses of some kind and additional shapeshifting. For now, I'll just be growing cursed crops from home to prove to my dad Dracula that vampires can survive without sucking blood.

What feels key, then, from my time with *Moonlight Peaks* is how the game evolves as you spend more and more time in its spooky world, and specifically in terms of you being, well, undead. Powerful vampire abilities – maybe that can be used in town on other characters – would go along way to infusing the game with more of a unique flavour, but how they're used will depend on if it feels surface level gloss or not. What would be a shame is if the whole undead take on a cosy farm sim remains merely a shallow aesthetic. But from what I've played so far I'm cautiously optimistic.

Moonlight Peaks is expected to launch sometime in 2024, so if farm and town simming is your thing, make sure to give this one a try while you can. The demo of *Moonlight Peaks* will be available for "a limited time," developer Little Chicken says. You can download the demo for yourself over on Steam.

Lauren Morton



ABOVE: I can totally see a vampire opting for a purple roof for some reason.

LEFT: What a grumpy old man. I think he might meet a bad end.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 2024	The Dust	Kalypso Media	theinquisitor.game

THE INQUISITOR

Vampires, jesters and pigs in a thoroughly muddy fantasy world

Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition, and it's fair to say this one was fairly unanticipated too. There's a backstory to *The Inquisitor* that may cause some to cross themselves in disbelief, but also a vampiric investigation with enough third-person action and adventuring to attract a new crowd of the faithful.

This particular inquisitor has nothing to do with Monty Python or Warhammer 40,000. His story traces back to the climactic event of the Christian gospels, that moment on Golgotha we're all taught about at Sunday school, when Jesus gets down off the cross and sets about making his displeasure at his unpleasant treatment abundantly clear. Remember that?

If this all sounds a bit far-fetched, it's because it's based on the work of a Polish fantasy author. Such things have a pretty good record in games, following the success of *The Witcher*, and Jacek Piekara is the latest to lend his stories to the medium. It's not his first foray into gaming, however: he co-created *Galador – The Prince and the Coward*, a 2D point-and-clicker with a hint of *Dragon's Lair* about its graphics, in 1998. You can get it on GOG.

Back to the story. Following the Lamb of God's unorthodox dismount from the cross, he sets about setting up a more brutal version of the church, its rule underlined by inquisitors who violently enforce its rules and purge the heretical. Which brings us up to date. You are such an inquisitor, Mordimer Madderdin, who dresses in black and has been sent to the town of Koenigstein to investigate rumours of a vampire, and to dish out all the revenge and violence that this reimagined religion requires.

A CHASE SEQUENCE ENSUES AFTER AN URCHIN PICKPOCKETS MORDIMER

DIRTY OLD TOWN

There's a real Koenigstein out there, on the river Elbe in Germany close to Dresden and the Czech border, not too far from Poland. It's probably not like the one depicted in *The Inquisitor*, though, all filthy streets and dilapidated housing as you step onto the dock to be greeted by the captain of the guard. Locals stand in the mud as flies buzz around the fish and pig parts they're selling, but none of them can be interacted with or spoken to, even if you barge into them, and they'll push you out of the way if you stand in their path. Stallholders stand unresponsive, not trying to sell you anything, doors and gates are largely impassible, and while there are men vomiting at the side of the road, more men harassing young ladies down side alleys, and a whole fair going on in the town's main square, it feels very much a world made to be looked at rather than played with.

PLAYED IT

A chase sequence ensues after an urchin pickpockets Mordimer, but his capture is stymied after the inquisitor takes a wrong turn and is blocked by a low barrier he can't jump over, despite dodging falling barrels in a QTE along the way. This is typical of *The Inquisitor*'s world, which puts me in mind of id Software's *Rage* in its stationary beauty but lack of interaction.

Mordimer pushes on to a more upmarket part of town, having been told to find the annual fair that's taking place. The mayor of Koenigstein is offering all comers the chance to accompany and entertain the winner of a beauty pageant by taking part in a tournament, and Mordimer agrees to join in after observing the young lady's embonpoint in a most unchurchmanlike way.

This exchange gives *The Inquisitor* the chance to show off its raddled and intensely biological faces, which on the mayor mean a creased and jowly countenance above a neck like a plucked turkey. The fair maiden, meanwhile, has some excellent green eyeshadow.

RIGHT: Mordimer's hair-care secrets remain undiscovered.

BELOW: The inquisitor's church is a... humble one.

It's a beautiful day in the village, and you are a horrible inquisitor.

FIGHT FOR FAVOUR

The tournament turns out to be a combat tutorial, and you're taken through heavy and light attacks, dodges and parries by the fencing master, before going through more QTEs to lift a pale, or large log, and carry it down a track before setting it upright in a hole.

Mordimer has time to enjoy a puppet show telling the story of how Jesus got down from the cross and personally beheaded the Roman emperor before taking his throne. Then there is yet another QTE as the inquisitor burns a pile of hay to the ground to find the needle hidden in it, on the advice of a young girl, Amelia, who becomes a useful companion.

Lest it be thought Mordimer is having too much fun at the fair, it turns out he has visions, and can enter an alternate realm called the Unworld where he's hunted by an indestructible tentacled creature called The Dusk as he searches for clues to help his investigations.

His first trip there comes after a vision of a dog and a spot of prayer at a shrine close to a pig butchery – the porky nature of Polish cuisine seems to be a bit of a theme, but there are occasional stalls selling vegetables dotted among those draped in sausages and proudly displaying pigs' heads. He comes to in a bubble of light that protects him from The Dusk, which can also spawn creatures to attack him. Both can be thrown off by praying, or moving into bright, safe areas. While in the Unworld, he's able to pick up objects that grant him a vision of a merchant accusing a woman of being a witch because she wouldn't sell him a jester's outfit.

It's all a bit confusing, but there's a lot going on. At the fair, Mordimer is able to eavesdrop on the locals talking – the subject of breasts comes up, the game seeming to have the words 'bawdy romp' somewhere in its source code alongside 'grit' and 'mud'.

The ability to pray has uses in the real world too, allowing Mordimer to see objective markers, footprints, and the smell of rotten fish hanging in the air, which leads him to the hideout of a criminal gang in the harbour area. The stinkiest bandit camp ever houses a single live robber who tells him that 'vampires' is local slang for the destitute, as they suck wealth out of society, and also gives a clue about a woman in a mask paying them to kill Mordimer... unsure whether he's hunting a genuine vamp or merely oppressing the proletariat, he decides to go to an inn, where he discovers a commotion. There's been a murder, and the naked, mutilated corpse of a sex worker is on the ground, waiting to be examined for clues. It could be a salacious moment, but our inquisitor is a pro and treats it as a crime scene. It's left to gossiping locals to talk about how good the 'harlot' was at her job.

MORDIMER IS UNSURE WHETHER HE'S HUNTING A GENUINE VAMP

PRAY TRACING

Mordimer ends up once again praying and following a smell, and is treated to another vision before apprehending a beggar who may know about the murder. A spell inside the suspiciously garlicky inn follows, with more vampire clues to be found, before a trip to the cathedral for a meeting with a cardinal and his entourage, and a visit to the town dungeons, where executioner and local psychopath Roland is capering about dressed as a jester.

There's an excellent level of detail to be found in the world of *The Inquisitor*, and I suspect Polish dev The Dust may have discovered a few new shades of brown along the way too. The Unity engine has had a bad press lately – through no fault of any developers – but this game looks like a lesson in what it can do in talented hands, about as far from 2D card battlers and shovelware as possible. Like *Timberborn*, *Metal: Hellsinger* or *Outer Wilds*, Unity is being put to excellent use here, and the game's Polish fantasy roots ensure plenty of grit as well as inevitable *Witcher* comparisons. At the moment, despite being well populated and with a muddy medieval charm, the world feels artificial and lacks the interactivity of The Continent. Some stallholders who hail you, guards who do more than just stand around – any acknowledgment of the player's presence – would go a long way.

It's also, in the first chapter at least, quite light on combat, spending more time sending you on clue-hunting trips across the city where the only danger is getting mugged in front of a pretty lady. Its brooding hero, and the nest of corruption he seems destined to blow the lid off, have just a little longer to stew before the February release date.

Ian Evenden

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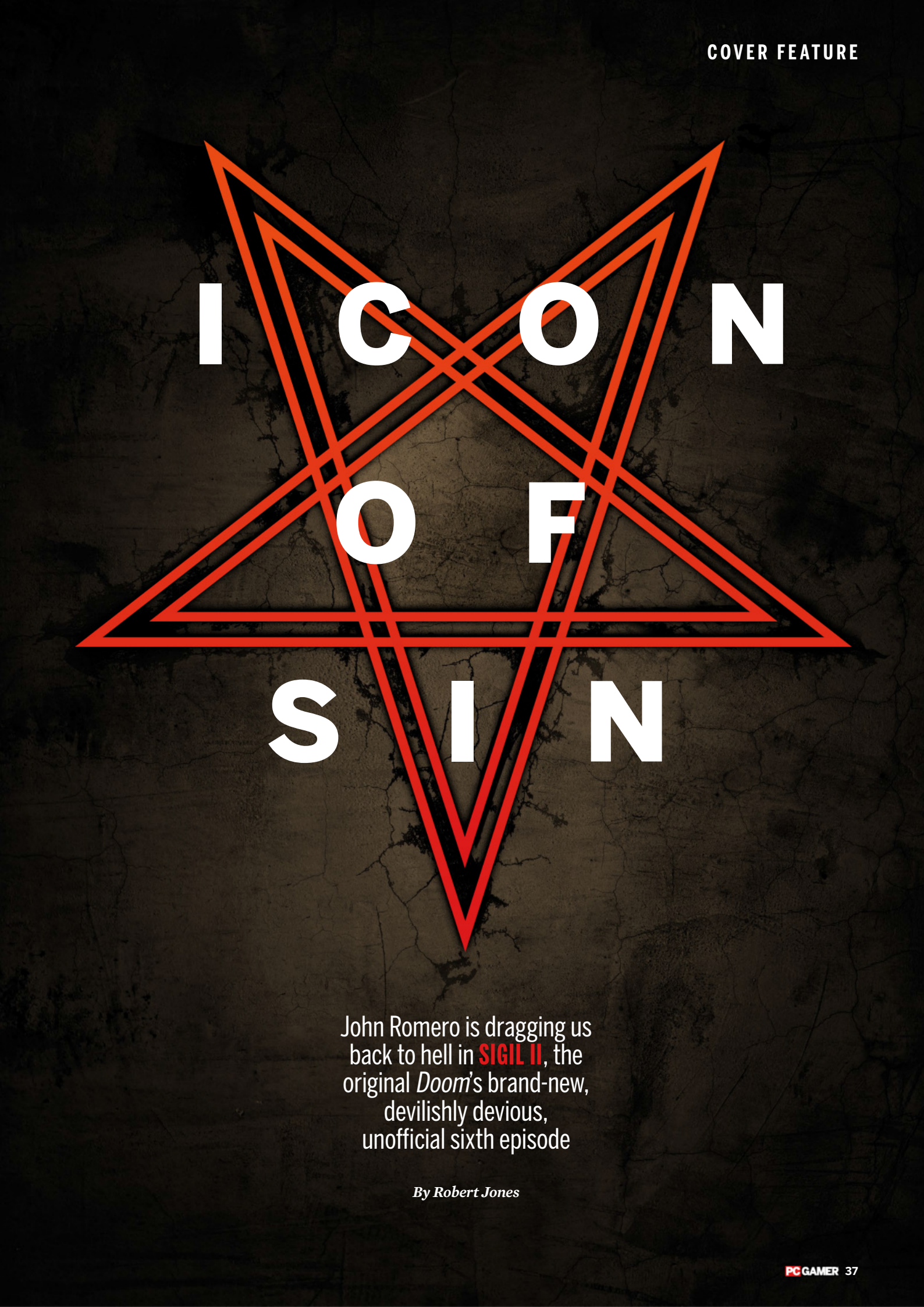


ICON OF SIN

John Romero is dragging us back to hell in **SIGIL II**, the original *Doom*'s brand-new, devilishly devious, unofficial sixth episode

By Robert Jones

For *Doom*'s 30th anniversary, legendary game developer and original Doom Guy John Romero has returned to the game that made id Software the most famous game maker in the world in the 1990s, designing an entire new unofficial episode for the iconic FPS.

SIGIL II, which is the unofficial sixth episode in *Doom*'s series of campaigns, sees the master level designer build on his 2018 release of *Doom*'s unofficial fifth episode, *SIGIL*, and promises to offer even more deviously designed levels and, yes, an even tougher challenge.

And, with *SIGIL II* releasing on *Doom*'s 30th anniversary of December 10th, we thought we'd call Romero up to chat about his journey back to creating content for *Doom*, *SIGIL II*'s new ideas, and *Doom*'s enduring legacy today in 2023.

Tell us about your journey back to creating additional *Doom* episodes in *SIGIL*, and now in *SIGIL II*?

With *SIGIL I*, the idea was that in 2018 I was thinking, "Wow, it's *Doom*'s 25th anniversary in December this year. I wonder what I could do?"Because usually I'm going to just tweet something, and maybe I'll tweet some long-lost photo or screenshot or something like that. And I was like, "It's 25 years. I don't really want to just tweet something. Maybe I should just make something."

And I thought, "Yeah, I haven't made a bunch of levels..." In 2016, I made two levels that I released, but I hadn't done a whole episode. And so I thought: what if, to celebrate the original *Doom* episodes, I made another *Doom* level – or an episode of nine levels? And that was the idea behind *SIGIL*.

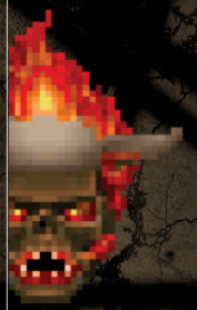
So it's kind of like, "What if I didn't stop making levels after Thy Flesh Consumed – episode four in 1995? What if I made more levels right after that, and the aesthetic and the gameplay and everything still felt original like that? What if I just did that? And made it so that it felt like when people were playing it, they were going back to that time, and playing the game as it was played back then?

So that's how I came up with the idea for the design, and the idea to be like, "Yeah, I'll put new music in there." And then with the advent of these new source ports like *GZDoom*, there's a way to play actual WAV files and MP3 files and stuff. It doesn't need to be just MIDI.

And then I thought about: what kind of music would I have? Obviously, it'd be heavy metal, but where am I going to get it? What kind of metal would work? A lot of metal is, obviously, vocalised. There's lyrics and everything.

I thought: this has to be no lyrics. Because you're focused on the action. I don't want people to be listening to the singing. I want them to focus on the action. It needs to support that. I was listening to Buckethead the whole time. All the time I was making levels – I had mentioned to Brenda, "Buckethead's music would have fit perfectly."

She just said, "Why don't you contact him? The worst that could happen is that he says no, or doesn't answer." So I did. I emailed him, and he was a huge *Doom* fan. He said he'd love it if his music was in *SIGIL*.



BELOW: *SIGIL II* is designed to be more challenging than *SIGIL*, so prepare to rip and tear to the max.

That soundtrack was incredible, and I regularly listen to it now, even when I'm not playing the game. I like how it starts out very frenetic but then, in the middle, it chills out.

Yeah. That's part of the reason why I chose certain songs. When the player is going through a level, it's not full-on action constantly. At least in my levels, there's combat engagement, and then there's exploration. So the music should also have those high points, and then the kind of slower parts, and then go up to high. That's kind of the way Buckethead designs his songs, and when you're playing, your action in the game matches the action of the song that's playing.

Talking of that, is Buckethead returning? Or have you got a different soundtrack this time?

Yes, I have a different soundtrack this time. I decided to go with a more... With an interesting blend, I'd say. It's industrial – like 1990s/2000s industrial – with some 1980s guitar on it. And it sounds really good. I played it for somebody, and they instantly said, "Wow, that kind of sounds like new retro wave." And it does. This one specific song does.

So it does feel like an era; like a certain time. But it does sound really good. I'm really happy with just how the songs have all turned out. They're just so good. I'm really happy about it.

Can you talk to me about your theory and process for creating levels for both *SIGIL* and *SIGIL II*? I know you've previously published your eight golden rules for level design.

All those rules – all those eight golden rules – are just super-important as a basis for making any kind of level. While I'm making the levels, though, I am thinking of: what do I want the motif of the level to look like? As an example, on level four of *SIGIL II*, there is a... I started with the idea of: what if I took the Techbase look and I brought it into Hell, in just fragments?

So you start off in a Techbase chunk of hallway, but there's holes in the wall. The wall's torn, and it's all red. There's cracks on the walls. And then the whole hallway is just shredded at the end, and it turns into lava and Hell

I AM THINKING
WHAT DO I WANT THE
motif OF THE LEVEL
TO LOOK LIKE?

WITH SIGIL, I WANT THIS TO FEEL LIKE YOU'RE PLAYING THE *original game* AGAIN

walls. And then you see another lone wall standing by itself in a little Techbase – just a piece of a hallway.

So it's like: what if a base was ripped apart in Hell? And you went from piece to piece, across lava and stepping stones, and had to figure out how to get from a safe part to the other safe part, even though there's all kinds of crazy stuff?

So coming up with an idea like that is what I have to start with. It's like, "This is kind of what it's going to look like." And as I started developing that look – if I invent a new thing, I go back to where I was at, and make sure that that was consistent with that new idea.

And then usually I kind of try – even at the very beginning of the idea – to define the idea as much as I can in that one specific location. So when I continue, I have enough of the kind of detailed design that I've come up with – and I put that into each new area, so that they're all consistently matching each other.

I'm figuring out, "What is the path through this place?" I like to give players multiple ways of movement through a space as soon as they start. Even on a secret level it's a really good idea... With the secret level, I wanted to create an homage to E1M1, E1M2, and E1M3 from the original *Doom*.

So when you start in the secret level, it looks just like E1M1, but horizontally flipped. Even on the original E1M1, you have a choice to go left or straight, and you can look to the right. So on this one, when you start, you have the choice to look to the left outside – instead of right, so I flipped it – and then in front of you, you can either go down some dark stairs, or you can go left around the corner, or you can go to the right and go up a lift.

So you have three big choices to make. Where do you want to go? But, obviously, as soon as you start, there's tonnes of monsters right there! You have to try and get rid of them, and then decide where you're going to go next. You don't know the best way to go. You have to kind of explore, and figure out: what is the best way?

But the motif for that level was taking pieces of the classic *Doom* legend – not actually take them, but make it feel like the original one, but there's something completely wrong about them that's been changed.

I really liked your inclusion of the shootable Baphomet eyes in *SIGIL I*, which did cool things in terms of level progression and revealing secrets. Are they back in *SIGIL II*?

So I have those. I have them back. When I started I came up with a checklist for *SIGIL II*, and the checklist had a bunch of stuff on it. The number one on the list is: I need to have, in every single level, more Baphomet eyes than *SIGIL I*.

Level one in *SIGIL I* had the most. It had five of them because I was training the player to shoot them to progress. And the funny thing is that the Baphomet eye is either progress or a secret. But in *SIGIL I*, I actually tied the second – when you start in that first room, and you shoot the first eye, and it opens the wall to the next section; when you're in that next section, the second eye that you shoot raises a platform out of lava so that you can progress. But it also raises a secret bridge behind you. So it's a secret *and* progress. Not just one.

There were five on that first level. In *SIGIL II*, there are eight on the first level. Pretty much, they're all progress. Some are secrets through all the levels. But there's eight on the first level in *SIGIL II*. There are almost double the number of Baphomet eyes in all of *SIGIL II*. So there's a ton of those.

There's also a minimum of four secrets on every level. Those have to be hidden all over the place. But, also, I've created a new kind of secret that is kind of a funny community meme, which kind of makes fun of the FIREBLU1 texture that we had in *Doom*, which was such a bad texture that it's funny. It's just like red and blue dots. It's just really horrible.

If you can find the FIREBLU1 texture on a level, then you need to shoot it. I usually leave a little ammo there as a hint. If you shoot the fire-blue texture, then it's going to open a secret door. It might not be right next to you, but it will be somewhere close, and you can hear it.

And that secret area has one human – just the lowest-level character – to kill. It has some items to pick up, and it's marked as a secret. Which means that unless you find the fire-blue room, you cannot '100%' any level.

BELOW: *Doom*'s Plasma Rifle... one of PC gaming's most iconic weapons.

Doom famously has one of the most active communities in PC gaming, making loads of extra content for the game. Is there anything you've particularly been inspired by?

It's funny because with the level-design perspective, the community has really gone in so many different directions. As you can see, the MyHouse.wad release in March of this year is really deep, and really complex, and does a lot of really great tricks with LINEDEFs and teleportation. There's so many cool tricks.

There is also a newer one named Venturous that also does a lot of really great stuff. And people have been dumping a lot of time into creating these things, and the community spends a lot of time playing them. And there are rewards for these really great masterpieces of mod design. Doomworld puts out the Cacowards every year.

There's really great authors out there making really neat stuff. They're experimenting. They've raised the detail level of what you could do on a *Doom* map to pretty amazing heights.

For *SIGIL*, I've obviously seen a lot of what's happening in the community, and where things have gone in certain

directions, like the invention of slaughter maps was a thing that people started to finesse.

So with *SIGIL*, my decision was: I want this to feel like you're playing the original game again. It's not running with different trends that are happening in the community. It's basically going back to the reason why people wanted to do modding in the first place – it's because they were playing this kind of action.

Other people can obviously create it, but I create it in my own certain way. And I also try to progress my design as well. I'm coming up with stuff... Sometimes the way that I'm coming up with a certain secret or teleporter or lift or whatever – I do it in a certain way that makes it like, "Wow, I've never seen that before. I've never put this together before. That's actually kind of cool. What a neat idea." So a lot of that is happening in *SIGIL II*'s design.

I've heard that when making a new episode for *Doom* you always design the first level last. Why is that?

I do the first level last because by the time I finish just about everything, I know everything about where the player is going, the things they might need to know later, and the styles that I've developed that I thought looked really good in certain places. I can put all of that in that first level to really hook a player in... like, if they like that, they will probably like what comes later. It's showing the player what they're going to see, and what they're going to experience.

When I was making, say, *SIGIL I*, I started out with... the first level was going to be level five. It started to get too big. And then I moved it to level seven. When I'm making a level, where I start the player, it sometimes ends up not being where the player is going to start. Sometimes I move the start to somewhere totally different because it doesn't feel right, or I need that room to be totally different.

I'll put a certain number of, let's say, Baphomet eyes on a level, but I know that when I make the first level, I'm going to teach them what these things are. If someone was playing a *SIGIL* level – like, a tester was playing the first level I made, where they've never seen the *SIGIL* Baphomet eye thing and they don't really know what to do, I'm not worried that they don't know what to do, because I know that later when I make that first level, I'll teach them what to do.

I really have not gotten any comments from anybody saying that they did not know that they needed to shoot that eye. It's like, there's a reason why that whole room is red, and the eye is green. It's almost like obvious.

As soon as you do that, you know forever what to do. It was really easy that when you go into the next room, and you go forward, I made sure that it appeared right in front of you again. And you know to shoot that. You've now fully understood what to do with those eyes, and now I can start hiding them.

What would you say is your favourite level from *SIGIL II*? Or the level that you think is the most devious?

Jeez. They are all really good. They're really fun. I can tell you that level two is such a hard, devious map. Also what I do when I'm on Twitch – the viewers have

I PLAY IN *nightmare mode*, AND LEVEL TWO IN NIGHTMARE – I CAN BARELY GET OUT OF THE FIRST ROOM. IT'S SO CRAZY

the ability to pay these bits, and tell me that they want me to play in nightmare mode. So I play in nightmare mode, and level two in nightmare – I can barely get out of the first room. It's so crazy.

But when you start, there's nothing. When you start on level two, there's nothing around. As soon as you start moving, everything starts happening. And it's crazy. Level two is such a really fun level, and it's so small, too. It's such a small level. It's very devious.

Did you find that you had to question yourself when you were building these new levels, and go, "What a minute, how would I have done things back with *Doom* in 1993?"
It's just natural. I don't even have to think about that. I'm making them just, like, original. Because... I'd say because being in the tool, and having the limitations of the data structure for the levels, dictates a specific type of design aesthetic.

To me, it's just natural. I don't need to think, "I may not do that because that's too modern" or something. It's like, "This totally fits. It's in the level. And I want to do new things if I can, because it's always interesting when people play a WAD, and they see something they haven't seen before."

But the aesthetic, the look of the place, the way that you encounter enemies – I love surprising the player with stuff. I love it – if the player has to backtrack, they're not going back through an empty spot.

In level one, when you shoot the Baphomet eye, and it raises the rocks right next to you, you can see the exit of the level. It's right there! You kill two monsters, and there it is. But when you get there, it's not empty any more! It's really bad. But it's cool, because from the very beginning, you can see where you've got to go, and you can't get there yet. And so you've got to go on the journey to get there.

And when you do get there – wow, it's crazy. Depending on your goals – like, if your goal is to '100%' it, you're not going to finish right then. You're going to have to basically leave that area, and go destroy that cyberdemon. I really like the first level.

Now you've finished *SIGIL II*, which is *Doom*'s sixth episode, are you going to do a full episode for *Doom II*?
I basically am starting on that immediately, because next year is *Doom II*'s 30th. And I didn't do anything for *Doom II* except for the 'One Humanity' level that I released on 2 March, 2022. That level is the first *Doom II* level I've made since 1994.

So it's been a long time, and people are really excited to see what happens, and what I'm going to do. And that 'One Humanity' level has an Arch-Vile trap, and all kinds of stuff that you see in *Doom II*. So I'm basically streaming my level design all the time. When I start working on the next one, it's all *Doom II*, and I'll be streaming it. And I've got a lot of levels to make, so I've got to get through them!

There's a design around all of it. It's taking, basically, all of *Doom II*, and breaking it up into, I think, six five-level sets, and each set has a specific theme. So I'm tying them together in that way. I think it's going to be... you know, the level size will get bigger as you get through the levels. I think it'll start with a lot of smaller levels, and kind of move you through until the bigger levels are in the last two five-level segments. That'll be where the biggest ones are at.

Well, I will look forward to getting the super shotgun back in action.
Yes!

Doom Guy on Doom

On *Doom*'s 30th, Romero reflects on the iconic FPS

On *Doom*'s 30th birthday how do you feel now, in 2023, about the original game and its legacy?
I'm just blown away that the game is still relevant. People can still play it, and people are so active in it. I don't know of any other game that comes from so long ago like that that has a community that is engaged on a daily basis, making content for it, and playing it – and the fact that I can even get viewers on Twitch while I'm building levels is nuts.

We knew that *Doom* was going to be a good game, but we never expected it to live for so long. We thought, "We're going to make *Doom II*. It'll be better than *Doom I*, and when we're done with *Doom II*, we're finished with *Doom*. Next!" And then we started working on the next game, which was *Quake*.

And that's how we did all of our games. It was just like, "Man, a new game. Next!" It was just like, "It's going to be a great game." With *Doom*, it was the game that we said, "This has to be the best thing that we can imagine playing." And that's what we tried to make. And then we moved on.

It's just amazing that the design of that engine, and the data structure for the levels, was this perfect position of just complex enough to make levels that are really fun to play, and they look really good, but easy enough to actually edit and make. Modern development is so complex with the amount of assets – the asset weight that's in these games. It's hard for people to do mods.

So it was this perfect design for a technology that I think is one of the reasons why it's lived so long. It's such a fun game to play, and it was fun to make more content for it. And people loved the fact that they could do that.

What would you say is the number-one thing that has ensured *Doom*'s longevity?
Well, modding and the source release in '97. Those were the two things that were critical. And it was also just the fact that that source release was so soon. When we started *Doom* in January 1993, we didn't finish the *Doom* engine and the *Doom* code-base editing until September '94, when *Doom II* basically shipped.

So after September '94, the time between that end date and our release of the source was like three years, which is not long. We were making a new technology that far surpassed the *Doom* technology, and so we felt good putting all the source out there for people, and putting it out as a GPL release that means that people can make commercial products from it. It was like, "We want everyone to have this." ■

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THE HISTORY OF DOOM

Charting 30 YEARS of the genre-defining (and redefining) FPS series

By Rick Lane

The history of *Doom* is more than just the tale of how John Romero and John Carmack came together to create a PC gaming phenomenon. The history of *Doom* is the history of id Software and the history of the FPS itself. From the 1993 original to 2020's *Doom Eternal*, each new *Doom* game developed by id Software has both reflected the culture of the studio at the time, and moved the needle of the FPS in some manner.

I've royally caco'd this up.

Doom

RELEASED 1993 DEVELOPER id Software

The development of 1993's *Doom* is one of the most well-documented projects in the medium's history. After John Carmack discovered a way to mimic the side-scrolling effect of *Super Mario Bros 3* on PC, Carmack worked with John Romero, alongside game designer Tom Hall, to create their own game, *Commander Keen in Invasion of the Vortigauns*.

After receiving their first royalty cheque from publisher Apogee, Romero and Carmack founded their own company with artist Adrian Carmack (no relation), while also hiring Hall. Through 1991 they made three more *Commander Keen* games, then released the first true FPS, *Wolfenstein 3D*, in 1992. After *Wolfenstein*'s success, id began making a follow-up shooter, this time inspired by a D&D campaign the four founders had played together at weekends. Nineteen months after *Wolfenstein*, a legend was born.

Doom's origin story may be familiar, but there's one element of it that remains puzzling. Why is it *Doom* that is so revered today, and not *Wolfenstein*? Id's first shooter was the real trailblazer, and a major hit in its own right. *Doom* really just iterated on those ideas, a fact acknowledged by the game's original reviews. PC Zone's review, for example, summarises *Doom*'s premise as "very simple, very *Wolfenstein*". Why do we worship the second true FPS ever made, and not the first? Clues to the answer can be found in those same reviews. *Doom* may have been built upon the same principles as *Wolfenstein*, but everything about it was so much more vivid and elevated. "The speed and smoothness of this texture-mapping system make *Ultima Underworld*, *Shadowcaster*, *Terminator Rampage* and *Jurassic Park* look like they're running in BASIC," writes Zone's reviewer David McCandless. Even Edge's review of *Doom* states that *Wolfenstein*'s 3D levels look "primitive" compared to id's latest shooter. "There are stairs for you to climb, lifts to find and aliens firing at you from windows... go back and play *Wolfenstein* and you'll laugh at the 2Dness of the 3D perspective."

But perhaps the most significant difference between *Wolfenstein* and *Doom* had little to do with visuals. In January 1994, right after *Doom*'s launch, Game Developer magazine published an article called 'Monsters from the Id' that points out how *Doom*'s new engine allowed "all objects to have physical characteristics, such as weight, momentum and even sound. For example, bullets were actual physical projectiles in the *Doom* engine as opposed to *Wolfenstein*, where they were just calculations".

AGELESS DESIGN

With *Doom*, id realised that a shooter doesn't just have to look good, it has to feel good as well. Add to that a far more striking setting and multiplayer capabilities, and it's clear that *Wolfenstein* pales in comparison.

Yet this doesn't explain why the same thing didn't happen to *Doom* when, for example, *Quake* launched. By now, *Doom* has been surpassed technologically countless times over, yet its reputation remains intact. Some of the reasons for this are the same that made *Doom* such a phenomenon in the first place. Its infernal sci-fi aesthetic is more vivid and distinctive than many shooters that would come after it. The game's deviously intricate levels have also stood the test of time, thanks to the design talents of Romero and Sandy Petersen. As described in David Kushner's Masters of *Doom*, "Romero had a knack for staging the battles, letting the player win one round, then pummelling him with a storm of enemies." Petersen's levels, were "cerebral and strategic".

There are other reasons too, one of the main ones being its accessibility. *Doom* wasn't just visually cutting edge, it was hugely well optimised. As noted in Monsters from the Id, *Doom*'s engine "has a medium detail mode" that "triples the speed of the game on slower machines". This, combined with its initial shareware release, made *Doom* a hugely accessible game. That accessibility has only grown over time, to the point where *Doom* will run on everything.

There's one final reason why *Doom* remains such an enduring phenomenon, and it's hinted at in Monsters from the Id. *Wolfenstein*'s launch saw an unexpected "cottage industry of hackers" who "hacked map editors, bitmap editors and sometimes entire modified games". Although *Wolfenstein*'s publisher Apogee believed these "mutations" hurt sales, id felt "that people have the right to make whatever use of the game that makes them happy".

Id Software's attitude toward other designers' use of its tech, culminating in the release of the game's source code in 1997, would prove to be the most important decision in sealing the legacy of the original game. ■

Doom's weapons remain hugely satisfying to wield.

Doom II

RELEASED 1994 DEVELOPER id Software

On the face of it, *Doom II: Hell on Earth* is the least remarkable of the five mainline games. A straightforward follow-up built in the same engine, *Doom II* was designed to let id capitalise on the success of *Doom* while giving John Carmack the freedom to pursue new advances in graphics tech. In

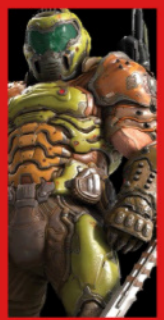
FROM DOOM GUY TO DOOM SLAYER

How* Doom's *protagonist evolved into the ultimate killing machine

DOOM/DOOM II
The original Doom Guy is a ripped fellow wearing a green suit and a grey helmet. But players will be far more familiar with his many facial expressions, the alternating side glances, and the evil grin when he picks up a weapon.

DOOM 3
For *Doom 3*, id Software strove to humanise the Doom Guy, making his musculature less exaggerated, and occasionally allowing him to display glimpses of fear, such as when he encounters that game's towering CyberDemon.

DOOM (2016)
The 2016 reboot shifted its emphasis. Renaming him the Doom Slayer, it avoided showing his face and doubled-down on his aggressiveness, hinting that there might be something more than human about him.



DOOM ETERNAL
Where the reboot avoids giving the Slayer much backstory, *Eternal* emphasises it, characterising him as a general of the Night Sentinels. We also see his face, and hear him speak for the first time, even if it's only about four words.

“ID HAS MANAGED TO IMPROVE WHAT WAS ARGUABLY THE *most playable game* ON THE PC”

his autobiography, John Romero notes that, “During an early design meeting, we agreed that the formula for *Doom* was perfect and that the new game should just build on what we started without breaking the underlying game feel players loved.”

While primarily an expansive level pack using most of the same features and assets, *Doom II* does add some features that would be important in the series’ history going forward. Most significant of these is the double-barrelled super shotgun, which according to Romero was added specifically because it could share the same number on the keyboard as the shotgun. “We didn’t want to tie a new weapon to 8, because the 7 key already controlled our most brutal weapon, the BFG”. Although added out of convenience, the super shotgun quickly became one of the series’ most iconic weapons. Alongside this, *Doom II* also adds interesting new enemies like the Revenant and the Archvile, as well as the titanic Icon of Sin.

While offering nothing like the leap *Doom* has made over *Wolfenstein*, reviews of *Doom II* were nonetheless ecstatic. In PC Gamer’s review of *Doom II*, which awarded the game 95, Gary Whitta highlighted the more nuanced enhancements the game made over the original. “The puzzles are more complex, routes more maze-like and things like weapons and secret doors more difficult to find. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of *Doom II*’s new design, however, is the overall mood and tone. It’s that much darker and more sinister.” Edge, which had awarded the original *Doom* a 7, gave the sequel a 9, stating: “Id has managed to improve what was arguably the most playable game on the PC.”

Doom II would be nothing without the foundations laid by the original. But there’s a case to be made that, today, the original *Doom* would be nothing without its sequel. Because of its slightly more advanced feature-set, the vast majority of *Doom* mods are actually built for *Doom II*, and the modding community has played an enormous role in keeping the original games alive while bigger, more refined shooters have grown around it. So while *Doom II* may be the least revolutionary of the mainline *Doom* games, it’s also, possibly, the most important to the series’ longevity. ■

Doom II placed more emphasis on moving elements.

Doom 3

RELEASED 2004 **DEVELOPER** id Software

By the time *Doom 3* entered development, id Software was a very different studio. The challenging development of *Quake* had seen the working relationship between Romero and Carmack break down, culminating in Romero's departure from the company just after *Quake*'s launch. Romero would go on to found Ion Storm with Tom Hall, where they oversaw design of *Daikatana* and *Anachronox*.

Meanwhile, id Software knuckled down on two *Quake* sequels, the sci-fi, hardware accelerated *Quake II*, and the exclusively multiplayer *Quake III*. By 2003, id Software had grown to a core team of roughly 26 people. But the internal dynamic of the studio had also changed dramatically. While visiting the studio in 2003, prior to the publication of Masters of Doom, Kushner noted, "I've never seen id's office as focused as it is now."

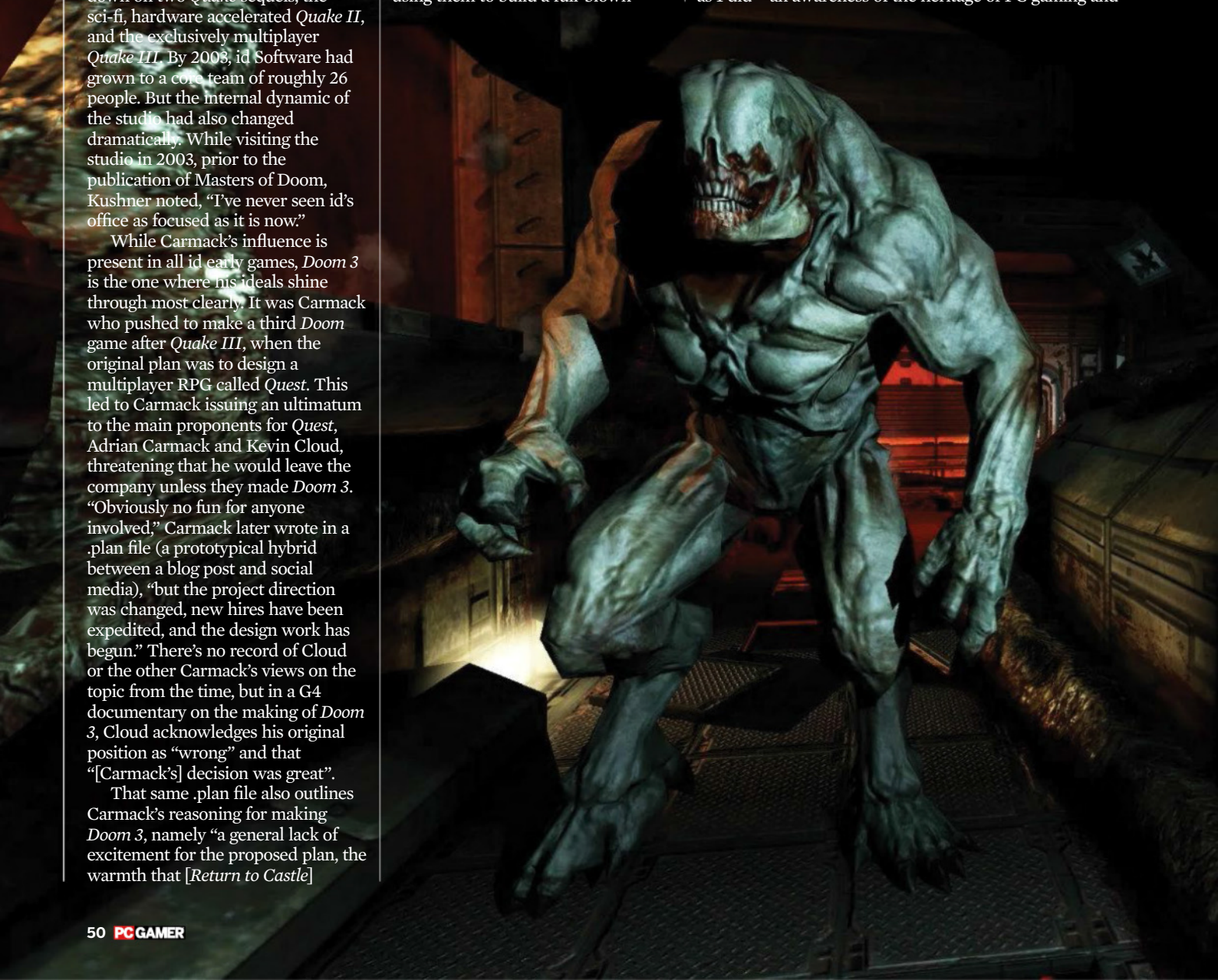
While Carmack's influence is present in all id early games, *Doom 3* is the one where his ideals shine through most clearly. It was Carmack who pushed to make a third *Doom* game after *Quake III*, when the original plan was to design a multiplayer RPG called *Quest*. This led to Carmack issuing an ultimatum to the main proponents for *Quest*, Adrian Carmack and Kevin Cloud, threatening that he would leave the company unless they made *Doom 3*. "Obviously no fun for anyone involved," Carmack later wrote in a .plan file (a prototypical hybrid between a blog post and social media), "but the project direction was changed, new hires have been expedited, and the design work has begun." There's no record of Cloud or the other Carmack's views on the topic from the time, but in a G4 documentary on the making of *Doom 3*, Cloud acknowledges his original position as "wrong" and that "[Carmack's] decision was great".

That same .plan file also outlines Carmack's reasoning for making *Doom 3*, namely "a general lack of excitement for the proposed plan, the warmth that [*Return to Castle*] *Wolfenstein* was met with at E3, and excitement about what we can do with the latest rendering technology". This last point also hints at Carmack's influence on the project. Of all the *Doom* games, *Doom 3* is the one where the art and design revolves most heavily around the technology. Its unified lighting and shadowing system enabled most of the game's light sources to be computed in real-time. Combined with Carmack's homebrewed stencil-shadowing algorithm (known today as Carmack's Reverse) the result was a hugely advanced light and shadow system perfect for creating oppressive, moody environments.

Doom 3's design followed on from these techniques, taking the scarier elements of the original *Doom* and using them to build a full-blown survival horror experience, one built not around generating a sense of power, but a sense of fear. Speaking to Polygon in 2012, id Software CEO Todd Hollenshead explained how the game's combat was designed around your flashlight, which pierced through the gloom. "The purity of the game is that you could either have the flashlight, or have the gun, it was just a choice you had to make in the game. I think that, for the game we made at the time, it was the right decision."

A TECHNOLOGICAL MARVEL

Judging by the game's initial reviews, it was the right decision. Ross Atherton awarded the game 90 in PC Gamer, while Will Porter gave it the same score in PC Zone. Yet even in these glowing reviews, there's an underlying tone of trepidation. "In 1994, we said of *Doom II* 'It's *Doom* all over again, but with more of everything that made it great in the first place'. That's still true, but today it's a much a word of caution as of recommendation," Atherton writes. Porter, meanwhile, says, "To be honest, some people may not 'get' *Doom 3* as I did – an awareness of the heritage of PC gaming and



an element of fanboyism helps in its appreciation."

In more recent years, *Doom 3*'s reputation has diminished, with a gradual acknowledgement that although its visuals may be atmospheric, its combat is flat and sluggish, and its environments cramped and constraining. Id Software itself backtracked on some of the game's ideas post-release, altering the flashlight for the game's BFG edition so players could switch it on while holding their gun.

Doom 3 may have been a technological marvel, but outside of that, in areas like storytelling and combat design, it is heavily influenced by what other games were doing at the time. FPS conventions had changed dramatically in the years surrounding *Doom 3*'s development, with an emphasis on 'realistic' level design, scripted storytelling, and cinematic action. In his review, Atherton refers to it as "quite literally 21st century *Doom*", a point that retains its relevance. To reiterate Hollenshead, for the game id made at the time, it was the right decision. But in the years to come, this receptiveness to trends would cause more serious problems for the grandaddy of first-person shooters. ■

"I THINK THAT, FOR THE GAME WE MADE AT THE TIME, IT WAS THE *right* DECISION"

Doom 4's brown aesthetic marks it out as a late 2000s artefact.

Doom 4

RELEASED N/A DEVELOPER id Software

Id Software followed *Doom 3* with the expansion pack *Resurrection of Evil* (which, in another concession to popular trends, featured a *Half-Life 2*-style gravity gun) before moving onto its next project, the post-apocalyptic shooter *Rage*. But this wasn't the only game id had in the pipeline. At QuakeCon 2007, John Carmack hinted that a new *Doom* game was in development, with *Doom 4* being informally revealed the following year via a recruitment ad.

Snippets about the game trickled out across the next few years. Speaking to GameSpot in 2009, Hollenshead stated that *Doom 4* was "very much deep in development", and that "everything I've seen on it is classic *Doom*". When asked how it related to *Doom 3*, Hollenshead's answer was unclear, "It's not a sequel to *Doom 3*, but it's not a reboot either. *Doom 3* was sort of a reboot. It's a little bit different from those."

Yet no specific information about *Doom 4* emerged until 2013. And when it did arrive, it wasn't good. A report by Jason Schreier for Kotaku stated that, for the past five years, id had been developing a "rework" of *Doom II*, one so heavily inspired by *Call of Duty* that there were in-jokes referring to it as "Call of *Doom*". "In order to be a big shooter these days, you have to have some amount of the big, bombastic movie experience," one source stated, while another lamented that the "horror and shock elements" were "bookended by pointless shooting galleries".

Where *Doom 3* was receptive to the ideas of shooters surrounding it, *Doom 4* was, by all accounts, in thrall to them, sacrificing the fundamental DNA of *Doom* in favour of what was believed to be popular. This was confirmed by Tim Willits in an interview with IGN in 2013: "Every game has a spirit. When you played *Rage*, you got the spirit. And [*Doom*] did not have the spirit," he explained. "It didn't have the passion and soul of what an id game is. Everyone knows the feeling of *Doom*, but it's very hard to articulate."

By the end of 2013, id Software was a very different studio to the one that had made *Doom 3*. John Carmack left the studio in November that year. The company was now owned by Bethesda, and *Doom 4* had been scrapped. Id had forgotten how to make *Doom*, and it would spend the next few years learning how to do it all over again. ■

DOOM TIMELINE *Charting FPS history*

- **February 1, 1991** id Software founded
- **December 10, 1993** *Doom* released
- **October 10, 1994** *Doom II* released
- **August 6, 1996** John Romero leaves id Software
- **August 3, 2004** *Doom 3* released
- **November 22, 2013** John Carmack leaves id Software
- **May 13, 2016** *Doom* (2016) released
- **March 20, 2020** *Doom Eternal* released
- **October 20, 2020** *Ancient Gods Part 1* released
- **March 18, 2021** *Ancient Gods Part 2* released

Doom (2016)

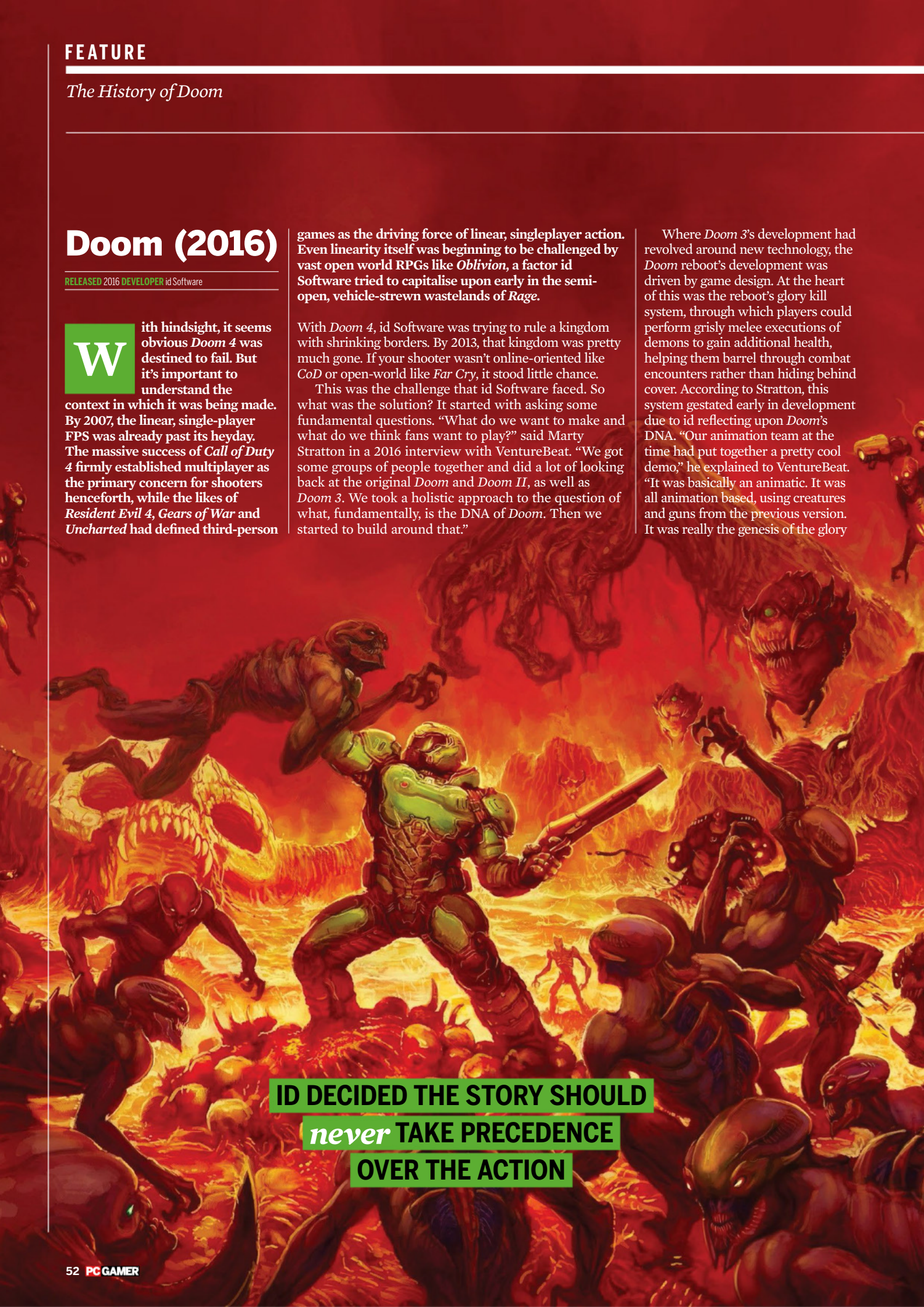
RELEASED 2016 DEVELOPER id Software

With hindsight, it seems obvious *Doom 4* was destined to fail. But it's important to understand the context in which it was being made. By 2007, the linear, single-player FPS was already past its heyday. The massive success of *Call of Duty 4* firmly established multiplayer as the primary concern for shooters henceforth, while the likes of *Resident Evil 4*, *Gears of War* and *Uncharted* had defined third-person games as the driving force of linear, singleplayer action. Even linearity itself was beginning to be challenged by vast open world RPGs like *Oblivion*, a factor id Software tried to capitalise upon early in the semi-open, vehicle-strewn wastelands of *Rage*.

With *Doom 4*, id Software was trying to rule a kingdom with shrinking borders. By 2013, that kingdom was pretty much gone. If your shooter wasn't online-oriented like *CoD* or open-world like *Far Cry*, it stood little chance.

This was the challenge that id Software faced. So what was the solution? It started with asking some fundamental questions. "What do we want to make and what do we think fans want to play?" said Marty Stratton in a 2016 interview with VentureBeat. "We got some groups of people together and did a lot of looking back at the original *Doom* and *Doom II*, as well as *Doom 3*. We took a holistic approach to the question of what, fundamentally, is the DNA of *Doom*. Then we started to build around that."

Where *Doom 3*'s development had revolved around new technology, the *Doom* reboot's development was driven by game design. At the heart of this was the reboot's glory kill system, through which players could perform grisly melee executions of demons to gain additional health, helping them barrel through combat encounters rather than hiding behind cover. According to Stratton, this system gestated early in development due to id reflecting upon *Doom*'s DNA. "Our animation team at the time had put together a pretty cool demo," he explained to VentureBeat. "It was basically an animatic. It was all animation based, using creatures and guns from the previous version. It was really the genesis of the glory



ID DECIDED THE STORY SHOULD *never* TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER THE ACTION

kill system, as well as the inspiration for some of the push-forward combat."

HYPERREAL COMBAT

As early as mid-2013, id Software had a playable core to *Doom* that Stratton says was "as solid as anything we'd done prior to that" aggressive, propulsive and, above all, fun. All the other creative decisions emanated from that core. The level design, for example, should take inspiration from multiplayer arenas, facilitating the players fast movement abilities. The art should be bright and vivid, like a comic book or heavy metal album, to complement your character hyperreal combat capabilities. Even the game's technological focus was influenced by the core design philosophy, with id's engine devs prioritising performance for id-tech 6 and targeting the best-looking experience at a consistent 60fps.

Perhaps most importantly of all, id decided the story should never take precedence over the action, echoing John Carmack's design thoughts for the original *Doom*. Stratton cites a moment early in the game designed very much to set the tone. "That first thing, where Samuel [Hayden] tries to talk to you and you throw the monitor away, that was very much, 'I'm here to kill demons'."

The end result was a renewed vision for the linear, singleplayer FPS, the polar opposite of id Software's plans for *Doom 4*, and something largely out of step with popular FPS conventions of the time. It was also excellent. "With *Doom*'s campaign, id Software found a sweet spot nestled somewhere between nostalgia and modernity that celebrates the pulpy sheen of big-budget shooters and resurrects an intense, simplified focus on the shooting itself," wrote James Davenport in PC Gamer's review, awarding it a score of 88. That might be a little lower than the 90 of *Doom 3* and the 94 of *Doom II*, but it's worth noting that not everything in *Doom*'s reboot worked. If you forgot that *Doom 2016* shipped with a multiplayer mode, for example, that wouldn't be surprising given how flat and lacking in personality it was. The game also featured a 'Snapmap' level editor that was interesting in theory, but too constrained in its toolset to facilitate a mapping community.

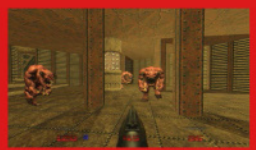
Crucially, though, the important part of *Doom*'s reboot, the singleplayer campaign, worked. Moreover, it proved that linear, singleplayer shooters could still be innovative and successful at the highest levels of development. ■

I'd heard the Doom Slayer was a surgical killer, but this is crazy.

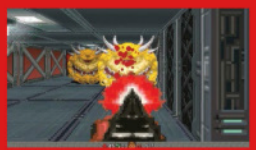
THE ALTERNATE DOOM *Doom has seen various alternate versions and spinoffs*

THE ULTIMATE DOOM 1995
The retail version of *Doom*, sold with an additional episode.

FINAL DOOM 1996
A standalone 'third entry' in the *Doom* series, built by TeamTNT and Dario and Milo Casali.



DOOM 64 1997
An entirely separate version of *Doom* for Nintendo 64 developed by Midway Games.



DOOM RPG 2005
A mobile version of *Doom* with added RPG elements developed by John Carmack.

DOOM VFR 2017
A short VR spinoff based on the *Doom* reboot. The F stands for exactly what you think.

Doom Eternal

RELEASED 2020 DEVELOPER id Software

Building a game that genuinely lives up to *Doom*'s monstrous reputation is no meant feat, and you'd think that id Software would be satisfied with what it pulled off in 2016's reboot. But the studio believed it could do better. "As fun as the last *Doom* was, there was a monotony to it," said Marty Stratton to PC Gamer in 2019. "In the later levels especially it felt like corridor, arena, corridor, arena."

For the sequel, *Doom Eternal*, id Software wanted to blow the doors off. "From the very start to the final boss, players will be seeing things they'd never expect from a *Doom* game." At the heart of this was, again, the glory kill system. But id Software would take the idea of exploiting enemies to your advantage and massively expand it. Now, you'd be able to burn enemies with a shoulder-mounted flamethrower, causing them to drop armour when shot. Each demon would also have specific vulnerabilities to certain weapons, enabling you to take them out quicker and letting id pile on greater pressure. In short, no longer would

"AS LONG AS THE SOLUTION TO EVERY PROBLEM INVOLVES THE PLAYER BEING *aggressive* SOMEHOW, IT FEELS LIKE DOOM"

Eternal is a game of truly apocalpytic scale.

you be killing mindlessly, your attacks would be precise and devastating.

Eternal applied this expansive approach to the rest of the game too. It would greatly increase the number of locations players visited, adding Earth and the celestial realm of Sentinel to the Martian moonbases and infernal hellscapes of the original. It would also make those spaces more intricate, giving the Doom Slayer more ways to traverse them, requiring players to "think [their] way through the level design" as described by Stratton. It would double the number of demons in the game, lend context to the Doom Slayer's origins through a more involved story. It would even feature a *Dark Souls*-style invasion mode.

As a sequel, *Eternal* intended a far more extensive overhaul than *Doom II* did over the 1993 original. But with adding all this stuff came a risk, namely losing sight of the gleeful simplicity at the heart of the series. Does *Doom* need a more involved story, or platforming sequences? Id Software was confident it could get the tone right. "As long as the solution to every problem involves the player being aggressive somehow, it feels like *Doom*," Stratton said to PC Gamer.

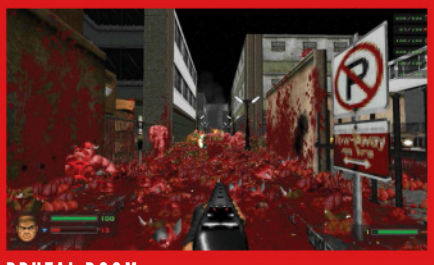
When *Eternal* arrived in 2020, the initial response was ecstatic. "*Doom Eternal* is a celebration of excess. Excess in sin, in violence, scale, speed and volume. I've never played a shooter this intense and demanding," said James Davenport in his PC Gamer review, awarding the game a score of 94. In the wake of release, however, criticisms of the game began to grow. That the added story elements bogged the game down. That the platforming elements were unnecessary and annoying. Perhaps the most significant was that the combat was too restrictive, with particular focus on the Marauder, an enemy that required players to respond to their attacks in a specific pattern.

Id Software was bullish in the face of such criticism, with *Eternal* creative director Hugo Martin insisting that the Marauder was "crystallising everything about the game". Nonetheless, there is a sense that *Eternal* experienced a more problematic development to 2016's *Doom*. The hotly touted invasion-based multiplayer was not available on release and was ultimately cancelled, with id Software blaming "the unforeseen consequences of the pandemic and remote working" for its absence, and instead focusing on a singleplayer horde mode. Meanwhile, *Eternal*'s composer Mick Gordon described *Eternal* as a "difficult project", stating that he and the entire *Eternal* team experienced brutal crunch, and accusing Stratton of poor management, accusations that Stratton rejects.

Yet while *Eternal* may have endured a rougher critical and developmental ride that its predecessor. Today, the consensus is that it is probably the best single-player FPS around. Unlike the 2016 reboot, *Eternal* is a game that takes time to master. But once you have mastered it, it offers a level of thrill and intensity unlike any other single-player shooter. The two expansions that followed *Eternal* pushed those ideas to the limit, demonstrating the full potential of the Doom Slayer's combat abilities.

Looking back across the last three decades, what's most remarkable about *Doom*'s history is not simply that the series remains relevant, but that it remains relevant at both ends of the timeline. The games currently being made by id are at the cutting edge of FPS design, finding new ways to distil the a formula first concocted 30 years ago. Meanwhile, the original games made by Romero and Carmack are omnipresent. They still play superbly, and form the basis for a modding community that is still coming up with fresh, exciting ideas. In both its old form and the new, *Doom* is, indeed, eternal. ■

DAD MOD *Here's a selection of the best* Doom *mods*



BRUTAL DOOM
What started as an effort to make *Doom* even gorier has become almost a game in its own right, adding new weapons, levels, mechanics like headshots and stealth kills, and abilities like kicks and driveable vehicles.

ALIENS: THE ULTIMATE DOOM
"What if X but in *Doom*?" is one of the classic premises for *Doom* mods. *Aliens: The Ultimate Doom* is perhaps the best example, featuring an eight-map campaign all themed around Ridley Scott's sci-fi horror universe.

MYHOUSE
What begins as a seemingly simple effort to recreate the modder's home in *Doom* quickly evolves into a twisting descent into eerie horror with multiple routes that all have different consequences.

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BEST REMAKE p66
GAME OF THE YEAR p67

PERSONAL PICK

JACOB RIDLEY

Oxenfree 2

Oxenfree 2 plonks you smack-bang in the middle of another sinister story. You traverse a quaint part of the world looking for ways to explain the mysterious goings on all around you. If that sounds familiar, it shares a lot with the first game. Though that's why I love it; it's a well-written horror novella that explores both the people and mysteries transmitted over the radio waves.

PERSONAL PICK

MOLLIE TAYLOR

Rhythm Sprout: Sick Beats & Bad Sweets

It's been such a long year I almost forgot about this absolute gem of a rhythm game from February. It's got a bit of *Overcooked* with its theme and humour but smashes that with an incredibly moreish loop where you slash and dodge your way through rhythmic hallways soundtracked by absolute bangers.

BEST EXPANSION 2023

CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

Fraser Brown: CDPR will probably never be able to escape the stink of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s botched launch, but what a way to end things. *Phantom Liberty*'s new district, Dogtown, and its cast of CIA analogues, militants and ne'er-do-wells allowed the game to go out on a high note, with a gripping yarn balanced between a slow-burning thriller and a balls-to-the-wall action movie. You get to meet the NUSA president, and much more importantly: Idris Elba.

The devs smartly weave this expansion into the base game rather than sticking it on at the end or making it a standalone romp, allowing it to elevate the rest of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a game that is lightyears ahead of the launch version thanks to the accompanying (and free) 2.0 update. Proper police chases, a progression system that doles out exciting abilities regularly, an overhauled cybernetics system – this is *Cyberpunk 2077*'s potential realised.

Ted Litchfield: Despite everything, I loved *Cyberpunk 2077* right from its legendarily botched launch – it was an engrossing, distinctive RPG with winning characters, more than a few bugs, and some gear and ability design that absolutely stuck in my craw. Even with my firm affection for *2077*, I knew it felt incomplete. I found myself dreaming of overhaul updates and a *Cyberpunk* version of *The Witcher 3*'s excellent *Hearts of Stone*. Nearly three years later, we finally have both. *Phantom Liberty* is one of the best individual stories CDPR has told to date, while the 2.0 update fixed every one of those RPG balance gripes that dogged the game. I no longer have to qualify my recommendation of *Cyberpunk 2077* – it's simply one of the best RPGs out there, and it feels great that the expansion to an initially disastrous RPG managed to stand tall in a legendary year for the genre.

REFRESHING AND MATURE IN A WAY I NEVER EXPECTED

Tyler Colp: *Phantom Liberty* earns the confidence that *Cyberpunk 2077* failed to when it launched. CDPR spent a long time refining how to tell a story in this world and it shows. *Phantom Liberty* has a firm grasp on the sort of bold storytelling that made the *Witcher 3* great, wielding both the technical artistry of the world and the team's strong writing to centre its broken cast of characters. It's refreshing and mature in a way I never expected this game to pull off and it has me excited to see more.

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

Robert Jones: Even knowing Fatshark's heritage in needing to seriously keep developing its games after release, I was still absolutely mad as hell when *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide* launched. The game was not only so janky and broken that, one time, it took me seven crashes with restarts to finish a single run, but it also shipped with key chunks of the game missing. It wasn't just me who was spitting with rage, either, with thousands of reviews on Steam at launch leading to the game getting a 'Mostly Negative' badge of shame.

Despite this, though, I could see the potential for the game and noted that at the time. When it worked I had a blast. A year later and *Darktide*, while still recognisably the same game, has gone through a vast amount update patches that have brought the game to the level it should of been at launch. And crucially, despite a rocky first year, the game and community still very much feel alive, and more upgrades are incoming from Fatshark, too. This is a game that is absolutely ongoing in the right direction, something evidenced by recent Steam reviews of *Darktide* now leading to a 'Very Postitive' badge of honour.

Sean Martin: It was hard not to be initially disappointed by *Darktide*, especially when it came with such a strong foundation of gameplay and a unique perspective among most 40k games in terms of highlighting the human characters in the setting. A game set in a hive world co-authored by Dan Abnett sounds like an absolute dream to me, so it's a real shame that it's taken so long for *Darktide* to get to a good place. But it is in a good place. Fatshark has slowly but surely made good on its quality of life promises, plus the class overhauls add far more variation to playstyle. Hopefully now the game is stable, it can start fulfilling the narrative promise of Atoma Prime and the setting's potential.

Robin Valentine: The thing about *Darktide* is, the core of it has always been good. The shooting is explosive and loud, the atmosphere is perfectly grimdark, and the music finds a wonderful new sound for the Warhammer 40K universe. Now I take every new patch as just an excuse to dive back into blasting heretics.

BEST
SETTING
2023

DREDGE

Mollie Taylor: *Dredge* has the most immaculate vibes of any game I've played this year. By day it's a relaxing and serene fishing game, but once the sun sets it turns into an unsettling realisation of how isolated your tiny boat is on those big dark waters. *Dredge* plays to that polarity wonderfully, crafting a delightfully spooky world that has my usual horror-averse self desperate to dig deeper into its mysteries. That doesn't just come from the seas you sail, but also from the twisted aberrations of different fish you can find lurking around. I've never been so psyched to fill an encyclopaedia with catches that have a thousand eyes, rotting flesh and bulging boils.

Sarah James: This isn't the sort of game I'd have thought would hold my interest for long but, as Mollie points out, the contrast between day and night almost makes *Dredge* two games in one. You have the relaxing serene fishing game while the light holds, but you'd better watch the time – if you get stuck far away from somewhere to dock when darkness falls, you're gonna have a lot more than a fishing quota to worry about.

Tyler Colp: The way *Dredge*'s in-game clock only moves forward when you drive your boat or take actions is, frankly, brilliant. I'm not a horror game player because I refuse to go down the dark hallway that surely has a monster in it. In *Dredge*, you can avoid the dark all you want, but eventually, curiosity is going to get the better of you. The fishing is so simple and satisfying that you get greedy, stay out a little too long, and face the consequences. The sea turns against you, eyes appear in the distance and rocks jut out of the water where they didn't before. At any point, you could've turned back before it got too late, but you didn't. *Dredge* is a fishing game, but you're the unsuspecting fish, slowly lured into its ugly nightmare.

Sean Martin: *Dredge* is a brilliantly unnerving game. Even when there isn't a sea monster trying to chomp you, there's this deep sense the world is wrong somehow – twisted out of shape like the mutant fish you haul aboard.

BEST STORY 2023

ALAN WAKE 2

Jacob Ridley: A blend of entertaining horror and surreal scenes, *Alan Wake 2* manages to keep you along for the ride through every twist and turn. You might find yourself trapped in the Dark Place and a never-ending talk show, but you can always rely on quality case work and a fine attention to detail to figure out what the heck is happening in the woods in Washington.

Fraser Brown: I'd be happy to play an entire game as Saga, Alan's new FBI buddy. I don't like playing as a cop, and the FBI are the worst kind, but I'm a sucker for a game that properly lets you get stuck into the investigative side of police work. Connecting clues with string and profiling characters with Saga's supernatural skills was honestly a lot more fun than shooting spooky shadow monsters. I know we've given this Best Story, but for me it's all about the police procedural stuff.

Ted Litchfield: When it comes to videogame Twin Peaks riffs released in 2010 and filtered through a non-US perspective, I always preferred *Deadly Premonition* to *Alan Wake*. *Alan Wake 2*, though? This is the first thing, the first work of fiction to hit the same sweet spot for me as Twin Peaks' perfect third season, The Return, showing the passage of time weathering characters you've come to know, their unresolved crises rising to the surface once again in an America gone sour. I am now so much more appreciative of that first game, knowing it led to this.

As much as *Alan Wake 2* consciously references The Return and the 2014 mystery classic, True Detective, it doesn't feel imitative. This is a phenomenal horror story, and a technical achievement as well, marrying some of the most photorealistic graphics I've ever seen with inspired art direction.

A GAME ABOUT WRITING BUT ALSO A GAME FULL OF WRITING

Robin Valentine: We're giving *Alan Wake 2* Best Story, but you could just as well call it Most Story. The thing that's so striking for me about the game is how many different, layered ways it gets its narrative across – the seamless blending of traditional cutscenes, live action sequences, conversations, manuscript pages and documents, radio programs, TV commercials, music, environmental design, investigation pinboards... it's a game about writing but also a game full of writing, all of it woven together so densely into this big, weird, messy, totally unique perspective.

Remedy's enthusiasm and creativity just bursts out of every pore of the experience, and that's such a magical thing to see in a big budget, technical showcase of a game like this. So it's exciting that this feels like only the beginning of a new connected universe that brings together all of the studio's work to date.

BEST ADVENTURE 2023

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Robert Jones: *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* was bigger and better than *Fallen Order* in every way, but it was how it seemed to honour the Star Wars PC game greats of old like *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* and *Knights of the Old Republic* that got me well and truly hooked. I can take or leave the *Souls*-lite combat mechanics, but the dynamic movement options, rewarding exploration, as well as cinematic presentation and storytelling just delivers what I want from a Star Wars adventure. The fact I finished this game in one sitting speaks volumes to just how well it clicked for me. Now if we can just have dark force powers unlocked in the inevitable third game, Kyle Katarn can retire for good.

Sean Martin: The funny thing is I completely bounced off *Fallen Order* when I first tried it, but *Jedi Survivor* was so good that it made me want to experience Cal's backstory. The game just keeps growing; adding new mechanics like bounty hunting, fishing, space chess, and all the while you've got these giant worlds to explore filled with fun Star Wars Easter eggs and yes, more beard options than you need.

Morgan Park: I also wasn't the biggest *Fallen Order* fan, but *Jedi Survivor* charmed me with its slightly less try-hard combat and playful levels that felt of a kind with my favourite PlayStation 2 platformers. It should speak volumes that I was too busy having a great time double jumping, grapple hooking, and slicing up loser droids to let *Jedi Survivor*'s terrible PC performance at launch keep me down. It's the sort of confident, upbeat action adventure at a scale that only Sony games can match these days. The new lightsaber stances are a small triumph. By the end, I couldn't decide which felt cooler: the unstoppable deflection of the double-sided blade, or the overwhelming power swings of the crossguard form.

RESPAWN'S STORYTELLING DESERVES A LOT OF CREDIT TOO

Respawn's storytelling deserves a lot of credit too – I appreciate that *Jedi Survivor* doesn't seem burdened by the Star Wars franchise the same way the recent films and shows are, opting to lower the stakes and invest in character exploration over seismic lore revelations. Expanded Star Wars media is still needlessly obsessed with dropping familiar characters into stories they barely belong in, but even when *Jedi Survivor* indulges in cheesy fan service, I can't deny the craft.

PERSONAL PICK

TYLER COLP
Honkai Star Rail

Honkai: Star Rail's depth is elastic: you can treat it like a standard turn-based RPG with a surprisingly funny sci-fi story or put in the time to learn how to bend its combat into a straight up action game. It even pulls off a roguelike mode with *Disco Elysium*-style conversations. Few games, especially free-to-play ones, feel as refreshingly modern, confident, and extremely, hilariously online as HSR.

PERSONAL PICK

EVAN LAHTI
Jagged Alliance 3

They made a scrappy, goofy, fight-how-you-want RPG with a boardgame strategic map. I'm so happy. *JA3* is the oddball, eccentric cousin of mainstream turn-based games like *XCOM*. It balances the seriousness of its systems with hammy '90s action movie pastiche – your squaddies include a Schwarzenegger clone, female character who speaks only in innuendo, and several stereotypical Russians.

PERSONAL PICK

JOSHUA WOLENS

STONKS-9800: Stock Market Simulator

An '80s Japan-themed stock trading sim still in Early Access, *Stonks* hit Steam in July and hasn't left my SSD since. You buy and sell shares via a mock PC-9800 interface while pitch-perfect city pop plays in the background, building up your network, picking up stock tips, and possibly falling in love with your assistant.

PERSONAL PICK

ROBIN VALENTINE

Viewfinder

You spend long enough in a job like this, playing dozens of games every year, and you start to think there's nothing left that can surprise you. *Viewfinder*... well, it definitely surprised me. Even beyond its central trick it's an absolute barrage of incredible optical illusions and digital magic tricks that really makes you realise how much room there still is to innovate in videogame worlds.

BEST DESIGN 2023

DAVE THE DIVER

Fraser Brown: There should be too much going on in *Dave the Diver*. You've got a restaurant to manage, fish to collect, mysteries to uncover, big ol' sharks trying to eat you, and some roguelike elements that would normally stress me out – but this scuba adventure is, miraculously, never anything less than effortless and elegant. It has the chill vibes of a summer holiday spent on a boat, all sunny skies and Hawaiian shirts, and despite my long list of tasks, I never feel burdened or busy. Pure joy.

Robin Valentine: Really there's not much *Dave the Diver* does that hasn't been done before. You've farmed and fished and waited tables in videogames before, and it doesn't really iterate on any of those basic ideas to any wildly innovative degree. What makes it so special is the way it just keeps piling in all of those ideas, constantly expanding the experience so that any time you're starting to feel like you've seen everything it's got to offer, it reveals yet another layer. It turns that moment of discovery – of realising a game is more than you thought it was – into the core joy of the game. And it manages it without getting bogged down in tutorialising or overwhelming you with tasks. It's a very cosy game, but also a really elegantly designed one.

THE CUTSCENES ARE HILARIOUS AND BEAUTIFULLY ANIMATED

Chris Livingston: I've never played a game and thought, "Gosh, I wish this had more cutscenes in it." But the cutscenes in *Dave the Diver* are so darn good I'd actually plunk down cash to buy an Extra Cutscene DLC pack. They can be serene and enchanting, such as the first time Dave sees a whale the size of a submarine or meets a playful dolphin. They can be ominous as the massive eyeball of a giant squid rolls over and focuses on him, or exciting, like when a big boss like a shark or giant crab first menacingly appears and its name slams onto the screen like it's being introduced in a Guy Ritchie movie. Mostly the cutscenes are simply hilarious and beautifully animated, like when Chef Bancho unlocks a new recipe and has an overdramatic, anime-inspired cooking session with his flashing blade, or a skeptical customer has an out-of-body experience when tasting a new dish and ascends into a cloud of hearts or has a vision of crashing waves and glowing jellyfish. Like the sushi itself, these moments are exquisite.

REMNANT 2

Harvey Randall: *Remnant 2* came at a difficult time, landing in the middle of some absolutely smashing games – though it's still one of my favourites from this year. It crushes its predecessor *Remnant: From the Ashes* in every conceivable way, while still being the most inventive of 2023's *Souls*-like offerings.

One moment you're blasting your way through a plague-stricken techno hellscape, the next you're battling a fairy king in a shining storybook castle. Its levels are procedurally arranged, but they still manage to feel textured, with hand-crafted encounters and secrets to discover. One unlockable archetype even spawned a whole ARG-style hunt and a Discord server of dataminers hellbent on uncovering it.

The RPG side to this multiversal shoot-'em-up is stellar, too. You can combine two of its classes (called Archetypes) at a time, you have a bunch of rings and amulets all with powerful effects, and there's a broad spread of boss weapons, mods, and mutators to attach to your guns. The only downside is that it takes a little elbow grease to really unlock everything, but there's an entire Archetype which revolves around having a dog so I'm willing to give the game a pass on that. With a bunch of quality-of-life improvements already patched, and three DLCs on the way to flesh out the world, I'll bet my fair share of scrap that *Remnant 2* will only get better with time – and it's dang good already. Gunfire Games scored a bullseye.

Rich Stanton: In a year that wasn't so stuffed with classics *Remnant 2* may have stood out a lot more, but this is one of the few 3D action games that's ever successfully adapted roguelike mechanics, a game where you're actually excited to see what fantastical nonsense it throws up rather than bored by repeating patterns. The bullet hell-inspired combat is precise, tense, often devastating (for you) and the looping RPG-lite levelling structure makes even its very good predecessor seem like a trial run. *Remnant 2*'s one of those sequels that does everything the first game did but bigger and better, fixes pretty much every beef I had, and is a rarity in being a *Souls*-like with plenty of its own ideas.

BEST
OPEN
WORLD
2023

TCHIA

Chris Livingston: I love open world games, but such a familiar formula has been established that so many of them wind up feeling predictable. Collection quests, treasure hunts, minigames, gliders for getting around... these things aren't bad, but they've grown a bit stale. *Tchia* has these elements too, but puts such a fresh spin on them they feel brand new.

Soul-jumping is the highlight of the traversal system, and means that in addition to the gliding every other game has you can also leap into a nearby bird to go from drifting to actual soaring. Tchia can fling her soul into everything from fish to deer to rocks, making each trip across the island an exercise in kinetic improv. Its minigames are wonderfully inventive and original, too: rock stacking, cliff diving, totem carving, and elaborate musical challenges using her playable ukulele.

Every open world game has trophies for completing challenges, but there's another twist in *Tchia*. The trophies you win are physical objects you can stick in your pack and then shove into vending machines to get new outfits and skins – far more satisfying that just seeing a number on your stats page. And the island-wide treasure map hunt in *Tchia* is the best since *RDR2*'s – maybe even better, because Arthur Morgan couldn't soul-possess a dog to dig up a treasure chest or a crab to snip the lock. Not only is *Tchia*'s open world beautiful to explore, there's so many inventive ways to explore it.

Wes Fenlon: Kind of incredible that the first PC game to follow up on *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*'s systems-driven open world potential would be from a team of only 120 developers. Wait, sorry, 12 developers. Not only is the game adorable, it's full of "holy crap, that works?!" traversal options, from bobbing back and forth on palm trees to slingshot yourself to chucking a coconut off a cliff and then soul-jumping into it in midair. *Tchia* makes me wonder why so many triple-A games are obsessed with creating giant open worlds, only to be so uncreative in how you get around them.

BEST ACTION 2023

ARMORED CORE VI

Ted Litchfield: When I fired up *Armored Core VI* for the first time, I felt like Milhouse playing *Bonestorm* in the Simpsons, the protagonist of every '90s videogame ad physically blasted back into their chair by what they were playing. This is one of the best 3D action games I've ever seen, better even than FromSoft's previous dinger, *Sekiro*. *Armored Core VI* is a generous font of flow state kills piloting a ten-metre-tall mech in between the crumbling tenements of an impoverished world. It's also a surprisingly thoughtful bit of science fiction, casting you as this put-upon cog of an unthinking corporate war machine, the victim of indeterminate, life-altering augmentation surgery who slowly wakes up to their own potential to write the history of planet Rubicon. *Armored Core VI* has a similarly abstracted, surreal approach to the mercenary fantasy as *Metal Gear Solid V*, and *Armored Core VI* uses this simultaneously exhilarating and dehumanising setup as a launchpad for a twisting, mind-bending story that only fully reveals itself after multiple New Game Plus runs.

Wes Fenlon: During this year's GOTY debate, Ted and I both joked that *Armored Core VI* should win Best Story. Neither of us were actually joking. The sci-fi dystopia vibes are impeccable, but it's really the way every branching path plays out across three runs that makes *Armored Core VI* so memorable. The way FromSoftware rolls out new story options in your second and third playthroughs dovetails with the power curve, too, which works something like this: Cool > Ouch > Cooool > Fuuuu > Hell Yes > F@*# you > I. Am. Unstoppable > How the $#*% do I beat that??? > Now I am become mech, and my blade shall pierce the heavens

I FELT LIKE MILHOUSE PLAYING BONESTORM

By my third run, with my mech fully upgraded and my skills sharpened, I was absolutely embarrassing enemies that had once given me trouble. You have not seen a bigger clown than Baltheus, act one's hard boss – I sent his Pagliacci ass to therapy. The real elegance – and thrill – of *Armored Core VI* is that it's always hard to tell how much new mech parts are powering you up, and how much you're sharpening your skills until you ascend to a higher plane of existence. Anyway, best mech game ever made.

Shaun Prescott: *Armored Core VI* didn't win Best Story but if there was a category for Best Atmosphere, it'd have to win. The absence of even the briefest glimpse of an actual flesh world visage has a brilliant cumulative effect. This game is goddamn cold, and as thematically impenetrable as the tank-tread AC I used to trounce most bosses back before FromSoft balanced that build into oblivion. Its landscapes are unutterably bleak, and its moral world daringly hopeless. I didn't love being in this world, but it evoked strong emotions in me.

BEST STEALTH 2023

SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW

Phil Savage: Since 2016, Mimimi Games has been single handedly keeping the stealth tactics genre alive. Its first game, *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun*, spent years in our Top 100 off the strength of its clever cast of characters – all of them adding fun tactical twists to the job of sneaking silently through a huge, hostile map. Its second, *Desperados 3*, did justice to one of the major games of the genre's early '00s heyday. This year, it released Shadow *Gambit: The Cursed Crew*, and it's easily the studio's best work. Previous games had some quirky abilities, sure, but this time you're in charge of a band of undead pirates with a full suite of magical powers – every character widening the possibility space of how you approach the challenge ahead.

The basic structure is the same, but finely honed. You'll crouch in bushes, checking guard patrols and sightlines and slowly engineering your way through. More than character abilities, the best tools for the job are your quicksave key and the ability to synchronise actions to take out multiple guards in one absurdly satisfying keystroke. It's slow and methodical stuff, and absolute catnip for stealth fans.

ABSOLUTE CATNIP FOR STEALTH FANS

Unfortunately, *Shadow Gambit* is also the studio's last game. Shortly after the release of *Shadow Gambit*, it announced that it was closing up shop. But what a game to go out on – the perfect expression of the formula it's been working on for the last decade. A true statement that there's still life in an old, mostly forgotten genre.

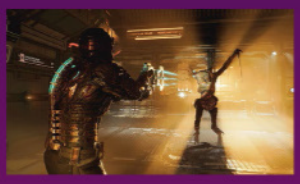
Fraser Brown: In *Desperados 3*, I was never happier than when I was controlling Isabelle Moreau. Instead of being a gunslinger, she used occult powers to control enemies and critters alike. In *Shadow Gambit*, Mimimi completely embraces the liberating impact of supernatural shenanigans, giving us control over a whole team with abilities just as playful and powerful as Isabelle's. The result is the strangest and most flexible game in the studio's catalogue. Teleporting duelists, cannoneers, a magical fish that distracts enemies – every single character brings something weird and wonderful to the table.

PERSONAL PICK

SEAN MARTIN

Dead Space Remake

It's easy to forget *Dead Space* in a year where both *Resident Evil 4* and *System Shock* got great remakes, but it's the one I most enjoyed. It captures the haunting atmosphere of the USG Ishimura from the original, but improves on just about everything gameplay-wise. Its success also breathes life into the wider series; I'll be surprised if we don't see a *Dead Space 2* remake soon.



PERSONAL PICK

ANDY CHALK

Atomic Heart

Forget the idea of a Russian *BioShock*: *Atomic Heart* is a wild, careening shooter that veers from aggressive silliness to dark horror in the blink of an eye, all of it experienced as a thick-headed Soviet super soldier who has no patience for any of this bullshit. It's atonal as hell, and genuinely one of the funniest things I've played in years: This is Eurojank with a proper budget, and I love it.

BEST FIGHTING GAME 2023

STREET FIGHTER 6

Tyler Wilde: Thanks to the deeper-than-usual tutorials and practice modes, I finally understand Street Fighter basics that have eluded me for decades – I seriously never knew what people meant by 'cross-up' before this game. (I have not historically been very good at *Street Fighter*.) That alone has made *Street Fighter 6* exciting for me, but I also like the goofy story mode. I made a character based on me – with slightly larger biceps, sure, and yeah, inhuman quads, but basically me – and watching my new Street Fighter self meet Chun-Li felt weirdly like actually meeting a celebrity. Better, really, since Chun-Li taught me how to fight, but the one time I met Jack White he didn't teach me how to play a vintage guitar.

Wes Fenlon: *Street Fighter 6*'s story mode is goofy. I'm fully bored of the *Mortal Kombat* style of cutscene-fight-cutscene. Treating *Street Fighter*'s stars as celebrities in their own world was a stroke of brilliance and opens up so much comic potential. I had so much fun with *Street Fighter 6* this year that I went to an arcade parts store in Akihabara while on vacation to buy the buttons to build a fight stick.

Mollie Taylor: *Street Fighter 6* is the first 2D fighter I've given a damn about in a hot sec. It's done a fantastic job of making itself approachable to newcomers, with a healthy mixture of casual and veteran modes to satisfy all tastes. While the new Drive Rush mechanic has split opinion in the community, the shakeup has made the competitive side of things a blast to watch. I sincerely hope more fighting games have a training and online mode as great as *Street Fighter 6*'s, and I certainly wouldn't complain if more of them had an incredibly goofy story mode too.

Rich Stanton: As a longtime *SF* player and fight stick aficionado, probably my favourite part of *SF6* is the modern controls. I don't use them, but it's opened the game up to such a wide audience that multiplayer feels incredibly diverse, every roster character rocking up at some point, and lots of lovely special attack spamming that I can brutally punish again and again.

SYSTEM SHOCK

Robert Jones: Nightdive Studios absolutely knocked it out of the park with the *System Shock Remake*, somehow achieving the near impossible balancing act of remaining incredibly faithful to the groundbreaking original game, which is considered the grandfather of the immersive sim genre, while also totally overhauling many of the original game's now antiquated systems. And it did this despite making the tough decision to reboot this remake totally during development, too. But it is testament to the dedication and skill of Nightdive's devs that it pulled it off and delivered a game that today has 'Very Positive' review scores on Steam from literally thousands and thousands of PC gamers.

Ted Litchfield: I knew Looking Glass Studios' 1994 classic by reputation alone when I dove into the *System Shock Remake*, so it speaks to both the timelessness of these largely-unchanged maps and Nightdive's incredible work modernizing the gameplay that I loved every minute of it.

I can't quite put my finger on it, but the gunplay here just satisfied me like few other shooters – every piece in *System Shock*'s arsenal feels good in the hand, and I'd especially like to shout out my love, the Laser Rapier, which allows for a surprisingly-effective melee ambusher playstyle. I was surprised too at how much I got on with *System Shock*'s navigational challenges. It's not a game that holds your hand or provides quest markers, but I was never frustrated the way I often get with Metroidvanias, and wandering Citadel's halls, bopping guys with my rapier or blasting them away with the SMG proved a delightful way to while away some evenings.

Phil Savage: In a recent interview, Nightdive's Stephen Kick told us that he expected the studio to take some heat for not adding waypoints to the remake. I'm actually surprised at his surprise. Often the real problem with going back and playing an old classic is how antiquated the control system feels. If the basic process of interacting with a character feels off, then I find it hard to push through and get invested in a game. I don't want a streamlined experience, I just want the basics to feel solid.

BALDUR'S GATE III

Fraser Brown: *Baldur's Gate III* is probably my all-time fave. I gave it the highest score I've ever slapped on a game during my time at PCG (97), and playing it again I've only found more things to love. The ingenious, complex systems keep spitting out surprises, and countless compelling story beats are hidden away for second, third and fourth playthroughs. It's so impossibly rich and detailed, and so much care has been taken with the characters, that I find it hard to envision a game that could top this.

Robert Jones: Simply put, the fantasy RPG of the decade. What Larian Studios achieved with *Baldur's Gate III* is incredibly, monumentally special and, honestly, something so rare and magical that I wouldn't be surprised if it took another two decades or more for such an order of magnitude shift in what is thought possible in RPGs to happen again. As someone who played the original two *Baldur's Gate* games when they originally released, I'd written this series off in my mind over the past 20 years as something sadly lost to the past, so it was genuinely moving to not just jump back into its world once more and to be reacquainted with characters I never thought I'd see again, but to do so and have a gaming experience that had literally never been delivered before. *Baldur's Gate III* represents the soul of PC gaming, something evidenced by its record-breaking review score, and for me was always going to be Game of the Year.

Ted Litchfield: In the lead-up to *Baldur's Gate III*, we talked about the promise of RPG replayability and how it never seemed to quite hold up – I like all the choices I made in *Mass Effect*, I think I'll just make them again when I've got a hankerin' to replay it! Could *Baldur's Gate III* really get people coming back to such a long game, committing to new, crazy play styles for 80 hours at a time?

Well, I'm hooked. I am desperately restraining myself from going back in to try out the disgusting bard/thief or paladin/warlock multiclass builds that have set my brain on fire. I sunk nearly 200 hours into *Baldur's Gate III* in a month and a half, and I need to give it some time before I dive back in.

A TESTAMENT TO THE INCREDIBLE WORK LARIAN HAS DONE

Robin Valentine: When we came to picking our Game of the Year, there was basically no debate – it was *Baldur's Gate III* in a landslide. I suspect it'll be the same at many other outlets. Any way you slice it, that is bizarre. In 2023, an unapologetically old school, fiddly, complicated CRPG is going to sweep the awards. Who could have seen that coming?

What a testament to the incredible work Larian has done here. Like *Disco Elysium* before it, *Baldur's Gate III* has broken through on the pure merits of being an RPG experience that is so clever and so rich.

In a year full of huge releases from well-established, iconic studios, no one could even get close to the cultural impact of *Baldur's Gate III*, and you really just have to marvel at that. Frankly I still can't believe that I'm saying a top-down D&D game is going to wind up being one of the most influential games of the decade.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

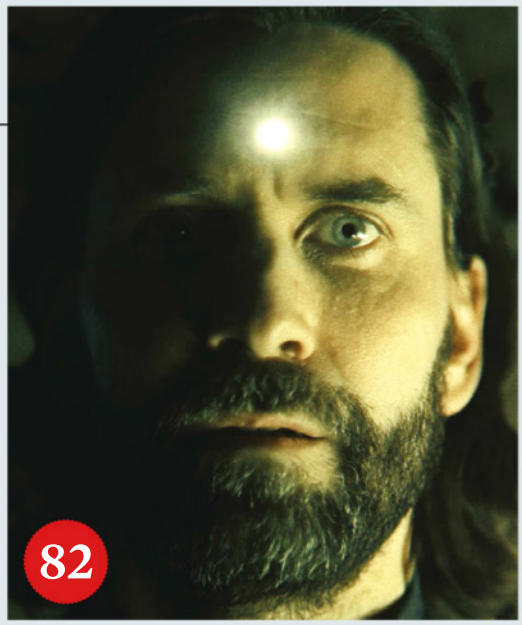
A complex craft

Over the past 30 years PC gaming has definitely come of age, for both the good and bad that entails. On the one hand, we've got spiralling development costs and constantly rising expectations leading to serious instability in the industry right now. Devs are being fired and studios are being shuttered.

However, on the other hand, we've also got more great PC games being released now than ever before, from simple, streamlined indie experiences made by just a handful of people, through to big, grown-up, complex gaming experiences as delivered in *Alan Wake 2*. This is a game that sits outside of established genres, features mature themes, and weaves a deftly plotted narrative. It's a scary good gaming experience not to be missed.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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91 **Blasphemous**

This month's increasingly mad reviewers...

CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Building regulations
Currently playing
Cities: Skylines II
This month
Mastered the ability of not going to the toilet for several years.

HARVEY RANDALL
Specialist in
Umbral walking tours
Currently playing
Lords of the Fallen
This month
Slid into a slick monster-slaying groove. Tripped the Umbral light fantastic.

NOAH SMITH
Specialist in
Atomising skulls
Currently playing
RoboCop: Rogue City
This month
Did a *routine* PCG psych assessment after being caught console gaming.

ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Hickory smoked teriyaki
Currently playing
Alan Wake 2
This month
Impersonated Max Payne lookalike, Alex Casey. Practised gurning in bullet time.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Barbed wire vuvuzelas
Currently playing
Blasphemous
This month
Created a new team in his bowling league, the Penitent Pin Pals. Lost to the Holy Rollers.

THINNER CITY

CITIES: SKYLINES II is a lot bigger than the original, but not quite better

By Christopher Livingston

Attention citizens! You may have noticed two exciting new features in our fair city. The first is the Large Hadron Collider, an extremely massive and expensive scientific facility that will inspire an interest in education and boost our tech industry! The second new feature is that, due to the heavy infrastructural demands of the collider, every sewer in the city is backed up and none of your toilets will flush.

Not to worry! To fix that I'll just buy more land so I can build additional groundwater pumping stations and water treatment plants – or at least I would do that if I hadn't spent every last penny on that big collider thingie. Time to mess with some budget sliders and take out a huge loan I'll probably never be able to pay back, so expect higher taxes, fewer firefighters and ambulances, and please, please try not to use the bathroom for the next several years.

I'm highlighting my questionable skills as mayor because my multi-million dollar large hadron collider breaking plumbing is symbolic of *Cities: Skylines II* itself. Colossal Order's new urban city builder is huge and impressive, a complex machine with tons of moving parts that improves on many of the systems and features of the original game. But like a scientist who can smash atoms but not flush their toilet, it's let down by some small yet important details. *Cities: Skylines II* is much bigger than the original, but unfortunately it's not better – at least not yet.

Drawing roads and snapping them together is smooth and easy

ON THE GROW

As in the first game, you begin with a small square of land on a giant slice of map. You start laying down roads, zoning for residential, commercial, and industrial areas, and watch as little bitty homes and businesses begin to spring up. Then the delicate dance begins as you try to balance budgets and costs while expanding from a small town to a booming city to a mega-metropolis filled with towering skyscrapers, airports and harbours, and thousands of simulated citizens.

There are some big early game improvements over the original *Skylines*, like the ability to import electricity from another unseen city by simply attaching your power lines to theirs. Not having to immediately build a huge polluting power plant not only saves money but precious space on your starting map square. An even better perk: When I later had both the cash and the room to build a couple big stinky power plants of my own, I was able to export my surplus electricity back down those same power lines and make some extra money.

It's instantly easy to see how much work went into creating better road tools for the sequel. Drawing roads and snapping them together is smooth and easy, as is upgrading those roads later with new features – lines of trees, grassy strips, and tram lines for public transportation can be placed directly onto existing roads with zero fuss. Toggles let you draw parallel roads and even entire grids with perfect angles and spacing. Even the world's sloppiest mayor

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Colossal Order's urban city builder sequel

EXPECT TO PAY
£42

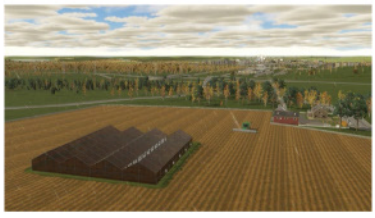
DEVELOPER
Colossal Order

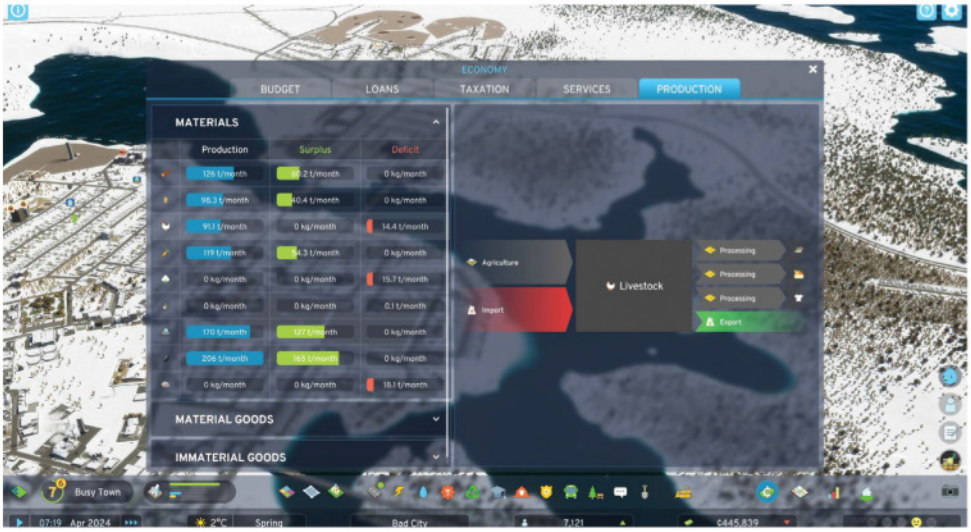
PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
paradoxinteractive.com/games/cities-skylines-ii





ABOVE: Connect trains to cargo lines and ship products to new regions.

TOP: Soon your tiny town becomes a big city.

ABOVE: Modular upgrades, like a school sports field, improve a service building's capacity.

(that's me, hello) can easily draw an attractive new subdivision or downtown area in seconds.

TECH TREES

Progression is handled nicely, too. Instead of simply being based on population milestones, you earn XP by building stuff, attracting new residents, and increasing the happiness of your citizens. Each XP milestone automatically unlocks new city features but also grants you a handful of development points you can spend on more unlocks. If you want to upgrade your power station to solar early on, you can spend points on electrical options, and if you want to build a huge observation tower, start dumping points into the parks department. The system is sensible and gives you control over what you'll be able to add to your city and when, reminiscent of a strategy game tech tree.

Another big improvement is being able to upgrade service buildings like fire stations, schools, and industrial plants to increase their effectiveness. If you don't want to build a second high school, for example, you can add modular extensions to your existing one that will increase student capacity. Rather than building a second wastewater treatment plant you can add on multiple additional processing units or an advanced filtering system to increase its efficiency and capacity. It's a much

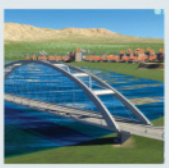
Some buildings can cost millions to construct and maintain.

UNNATURAL DISASTERS

Tornadoes aren't as dangerous as an incompetent mayor. Here are my man-made catastrophes

DOWNWIND RESIDENCE
I built residences directly downwind of polluting industrial plants. Sorry folks!

TAXI STAND
Look at that massive crowd! One taxi stand isn't enough for the whole city? Lesson learned.



SEWAGE
Sewage lines don't go across bridges meaning 3,000 people couldn't flush.

CAR PARK
I relocated a tall parking garage... but all the cars remained floating there. Call it modern art.

Traffic is an issue, but not nearly as much as it was in the original.

smarter system than simply plopping down entirely new service buildings to address the needs of your growing population, and clicking new modules into place on existing buildings is a tactile bit of fun, too.

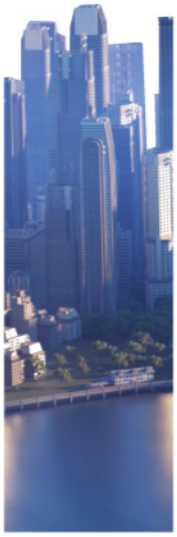
Weirdly enough, my favourite part of *Cities: Skylines II* takes place far from the skyscrapers and suspension bridges of the downtown metro area. Scattered across the map are resource nodes for growing crops, raising livestock, and mining for minerals and oil. As I earned new map tile unlocks I'd almost always spend them buying land far from the city's hub so I could build farms and mining operations. Rather than just being a square you plop down, you can draw the outlines of each zone, snapping the borders of your farms and mining pits to roads or other existing barriers. Specialized industries mean more demand for homes and business in the city and, best of all, materials and products can be sold to other regions.

FAR LEFT: It doesn't really feel like a proper city until you have an airport.

ABOVE: The suburbs look like a nice place to live.

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

As my city slowly filled up with buildings and residents, it also began to feel a bit empty – especially when compared to the original game which has been fed with dozens of DLC packs over the past seven years. With a mere 20,000 citizens and the designation of 'Small City' the milestones had already run out of new features to unlock. There are



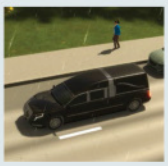
GRID UNLOCKED

There are lots of ways for your citizens to get around without using cars, which eases traffic problems. Here are a few...

BUS
Not sexy, but reliable city transport. Unfortunately still prone to traffic jams and accidents.

TRAM
Fast and convenient, though laying out all that track in the city can be tricky when you first get to it.

TRAIN
Perfect for letting your citizens take longer rides and even to visit places off the map.



HEARSE
No stops, no charge, just quick and reliable delivery straight to the graveyard.

only three different tourist attractions to build, and while there are several sports parks they're all small, the sort you might find in an average-sized town. *Cities: Skylines II* has nothing like the huge gleaming sports stadium from the first game that feels suited for a major city.

Zooming in close to spy on my city revealed a few other disappointing changes. In the original game it was fun to watch city services at work: firemen would race to a fire, get out of their trucks, and hose down the burning buildings with little hoses. Adorable and live-saving! For those less fortunate citizens, coroners would drive up to a house and then wheel out a sad little body bag to their hearse before heading for the cemetery. I was disappointed to see that in *Cities: Skylines II*, fire engines and hearses pull up to the buildings they're servicing but there's none of those wonderful little animations. A moment later the fire simply goes out or the deceased citizen is teleported to the hearse. Bummer.

HOBBIES

I see some citizens in the public parks I've built walking their dogs or practising yoga, but buildings like the skate park and high school football field never show any signs of life or activity. I'm not asking to watch an entire simulated high school football game while I play *Cities: Skylines II*, but it would be nice to zoom in and see at least one little animated teen on a skateboard enjoying the half-pipe or kicking a ball around on the sports field – something to make it feel like my citizens are actually using them.

DECORATIONS

Another detail a lot of players will miss are props to decorate their cities with – you can plant trees (and those trees will slowly grow taller over time) but placeable items like park benches, trash cans, fountains, and other decorative props are oddly missing from *Cities: Skylines II*, which means fewer ways to decorate and customise.

I don't wind up feeling as much connection to the city I'm building

A bit of silliness has fled the game, too. I scanned my busy city streets for ages and never once saw a single truck with a giant hot dog or donut mounted on the roof. In *Cities: Skylines II*, delivery vans, no matter what they're hauling, just look like boring old delivery vans. The style and colours are muted, giving the game a more realistic and grounded look but taking away a bit of the fun and flash.

Very little of what I'm talking about here has a real impact on how the game actually functions, but it does have an impact on how I play. With fewer reasons to zoom in close to spy on the minutiae of the world I'm lording over, I find myself generally sticking to a bird's eye view. I don't wind up feeling as much connection to the city I'm building as I'd hoped.

BOTTLENECKS

Cities: Skylines II has performance issues. Some tinkering with default settings improved my fps but at the cost of lowering the level of detail or disabling systems like depth of field. I experienced a lot of random FPS dips, slowdowns and hitches, and sometimes complete freezes that lasted a few seconds, along with visual issues like irritating shadow-flickering on certain buildings. As you'd guess, the bigger the city gets the more severe performance issues become, and while I expect plenty of optimization of *Cities: Skylines II* to occur post-launch, right now, it's a bit rough.

As for the game's other shortcomings, I'm optimistic there as well. The original *Cities: Skylines* improved massively after it launched – yes, mainly through dozens of pieces of paid DLC, but there were also lots of completely free additions alongside them, not to mention the thousands of mods created by passionate community members. I'm hopeful *Cities: Skylines II* will someday become a better game than the original, instead of just a bigger one. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The city builder sequel is packed with big improvements but a fair share of disappointments.

77

ABOVE: Build an airborne fire department to battle wildfires.

Fire trucks magically put out fires, no hoses needed.

TIME IS MONEY

Surviving the grind in PAYDAY 3

By Tyler Colp

Every time I learn something new about *Payday 2*, I get disappointed in *Payday 3*. For the last ten years, *Payday 2* has been one of the most consistently popular co-op shooters around. Absurd crossovers with properties like John Wick and *Left 4 Dead* and loads of new missions have turned into an absurd game about the most ridiculous crimes in history. *Payday 2* is effectively an R-rated *Fortnite*, and *Payday 3* seems intent on erasing that.

Payday 3 dials everything back down to zero and could easily be mistaken for a reboot. Most of the original crew return from the previous games, but seem to have forgotten where *Payday 2* left off. *Payday 3*'s eight-mission storyline is so serious and straightforward that it was hard to believe I was playing the sequel to a game where a character swaps bodies with the President of the United States after breaking into an ancient bunker beneath the White House.

While playing *Payday 3*, I was retroactively sold on *Payday 2* and disappointed by the sequel's reluctance to embrace its predecessor's absurdity. But *Payday 2* launched a decade ago as a very different thing than it eventually became, and *Payday 3* could be on the same track. It's one of the slickest co-op shooters I've played, but it's held back by a frustrating emphasis on playing its missions a certain way.

Stealth runs are the best way to unlock the most exciting toys

LOUDER NOW

Payday 3's biggest issue is exemplified in its fourth mission, Rock the Cradle, which is the only mission where stealth is basically mandatory to bring home a worthwhile pile of cash. Three random players and I spent an hour and a half trying and retrying to swipe a USB drive full of cryptocurrency out of a nightclub undetected. Our team squeezed through neon crowds looking for a way into the VIP areas without catching the eyes of the security.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Multiplayer heist shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Starbreeze Studios

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K, 32GB RAM, GeForce RTX 3080 Ti

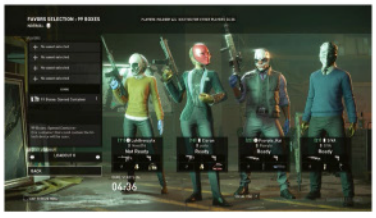
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

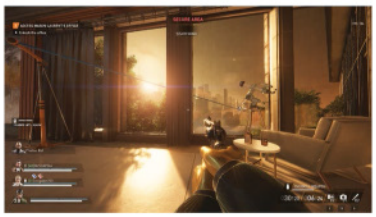
LINK
bit.ly/3PV7N2i

Mission objectives are straightforward but the steps to achieve them take time to discover as you explore a level. They're slightly randomised, too, so you need to spend a while casing the place to start. It was my first time on the mission, so I followed my team's lead and dashed from room to room to try and keep up, but didn't realise someone had left a door open for a guard to see me crouch-walking around. The alert meter filled up, I panicked, and was cuffed within seconds, ruining our stealth-only run.

Despite having loads of weaponry and skills to handle waves of enemies, stealth runs in *Payday 3* are the best way to unlock the most exciting toys – even the ones that have nothing to do with stealth in the first place. Its list of challenges reward you with Infamy levels that unlock more weapons and gear to buy, but the stealth-related ones are often the most valuable. They're so rewarding that it undercuts the depth available in its firefights.

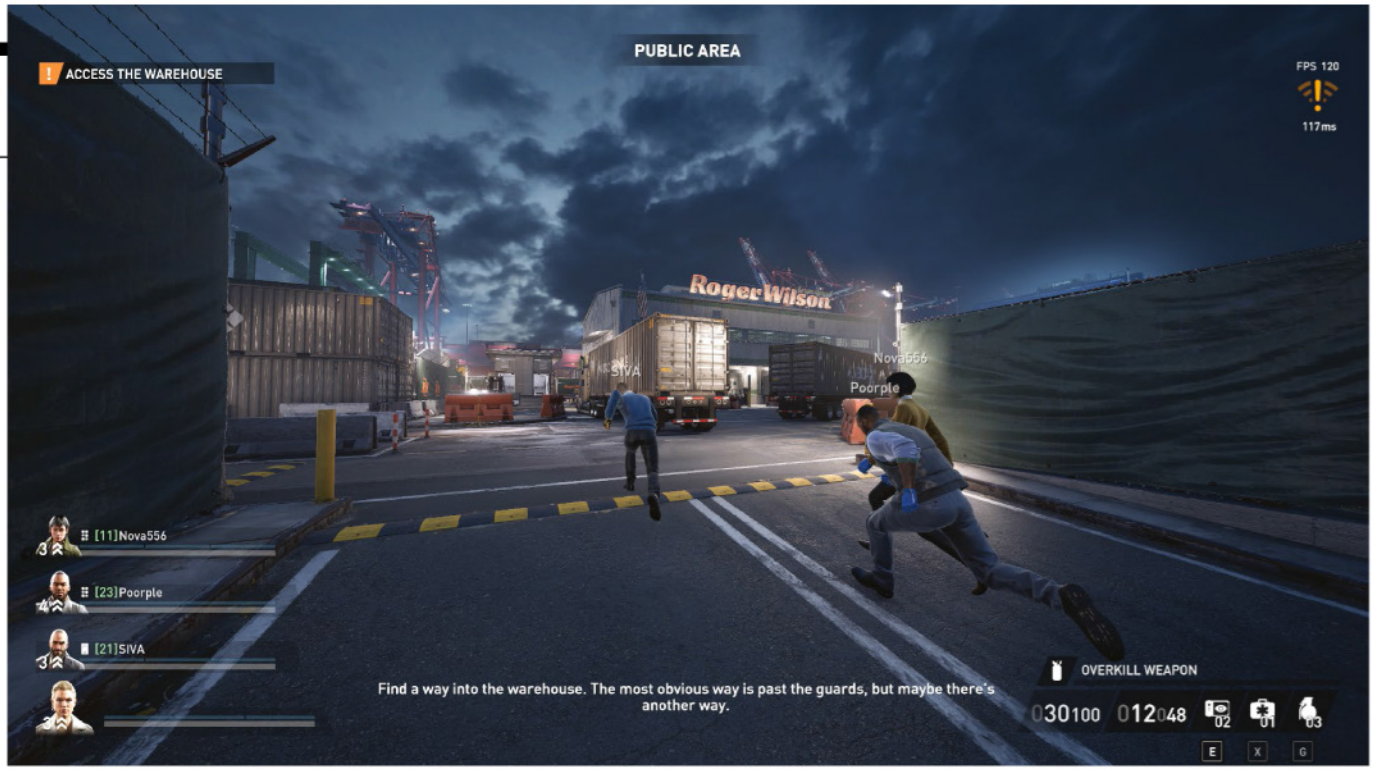
Once you've broken stealth, enemies pour in from every angle and you often don't know where your escape will be. It's here where

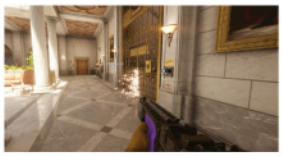




TOP: You can customise your team's loadouts for each mission.

Every level offers multiple ways to secure the objective.





TOP: While in stealth, you can't fire weapons or jump.

ABOVE: Once the alarms are raised, you'll need to stick together to survive.

Payday 3 shines, forcing you to bring weapons to help manage – and not necessarily kill – each wave of enemies. Shotguns stagger multiple cops in cramped spaces, and I found having a marksman rifle to quickly pick off the most dangerous foes in a crowd particularly useful on the bigger maps. Missions require your team to cover each other as you race to secure bags of cash before you're completely overwhelmed.

Payday 3's best moments are when mistakes happen and, instead of giving you a game over, the game shifts into a different mode. It emulates the ramping tension of a heist movie and lets everyone play a role no matter what gear they bring to the mission. It's a blast to improvise your solutions on the fly.

But the rewards you get for going loud don't feel correctly balanced against those you get for staying quiet. And while stealth can be fun, the balance of rewards you get isn't quite right. It's close, though, so I'm hopeful that revisions to its progression system and new heists – it only has eight compared to *Payday 2*'s 78 – will make it shine in the future. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Starbreeze Studios' *Payday 3* is a slick co-op shooter mired by a somewhat limiting progression system.

67

You can use hostages as shields to keep cops from shooting at you.

CRIME CATALOGUE

Four standout missions in Payday 3

DIRTY ICE
A vault heist in a tiny jewellery store that's ripe for explosive firefights.

ROCK THE CRADLE
A busy nightclub with a valuable USB stick deep underneath it.

99 BOXES
Sneak or fight through a maze of containers with as much loot as you can.

TOUCH THE SKY
A sleek art gallery that erupts into a race to find the most valuable paintings.

A TALE OF TWO GAMES

LORDS OF THE FALLEN is a great Souls-like, haunted by some bizarre choices

By Harvey Randall

L*ords of the Fallen*'s 2023 reboot – which I'll call *Lords of the Fallen* from now on for brevity's sake – is a big, heartfelt attempt to reinvent a franchise which came under heavy fire in 2014 for being one of the first *Souls*-like derivatives. Truth be told, Hexworks has done a damn fine job. But although it's with a heavy heart that I have to admit it, I haven't (*Lords of the*) fallen in love.

I like *Lords of the Fallen*. Quite a bit, actually. It might be one of the best non-FromSoftware *Souls* games we've gotten so far. It oozes creativity, its bosses are inventive and cool to look at, it has a huge host of weapons and spells to muck around with, and the Umbral Lamp – which lets you hop between the land of the dead and the land of the living – adds a ton to the setting and the moment-to-moment exploration. I can't ignore some glaring design thorns in *Lords of the Fallen*'s rose.

The Umbral Lamp is great. To break it down, there are two realities in *Lords of the Fallen* – Axiom and Umbral. If you die in Axiom, you go to Umbral, if you die in Umbral, you're dead proper. But it's more than a second chance with a blue filter.

The Umbral plays by different rules, steadily spawning deadlier enemies the longer you stay submerged. You can visit it manually, and dipping in and out is a big part of exploration. You can also peek into it by holding your lamp up, using it to pass through doors or along Umbral platforms, without having to enter it fully.

Visually, the Umbral is striking. It really feels like an alien world

The lamp also gives you a cool ability, Soulflaying, which lets you yoink the spirit out of your foes. You can use this to knock them off ledges, or you can hit their soul directly to make them vulnerable to attacks.

While the lamp itself stays fun to play with throughout, I can't help but feel Hexworks could've done more with the concept. You'll only typically use it to go through heavily-signposted Umbral gauntlets, and while the *Risk of Rain*-style danger counter is cool, I never maxed it out.

The Umbral Seeds system, though? A swing and a miss for me. You can plant your own vestiges (bonfires, for *Dark Souls* vets) at certain flower beds with a consumable item, though you're only allowed to have one at a time. In theory, this lets you set your own difficulty based on how much Vigor – the game's currency – you're willing to spend on seeds.

In practice it's just a mandatory Vigor tax. Vestiges are very few and far between, and unless you want to tear your hair out, you'll be wanting two to three seedlings at all times. I can't say the system accomplishes anything that more thoughtfully-placed vestiges wouldn't have.

Visually, the Umbral is striking. It really feels like an alien world. I once came to a chasm, died, went to the Umbral, and just had to stop and stare at the artfully-arranged corpse giants clinging to the cliff face. Using the Lamp was a shockingly smooth experience too, which I can only chalk up to SSD magic. I'm one of the lucky ones, unfortunately – from my temperature checks of the fanbase after launch, the game's had some major performance issues. It ran nicely for me, but your mileage may vary considerably.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Souls*-like with plenty of bosses, satisfying combat, and a ton of build variety

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Hexworks

PUBLISHER
CI Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

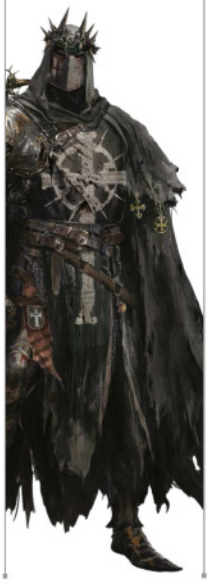
LINK
lordsofthefallen.com

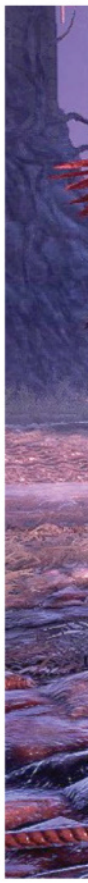
SLAYING GROOVE

When *Lords of the Fallen* feels good, it feels really good. A lot of that's owed to your character's movement – even at medium encumbrance, my lamp bearer turned on a dime. When you sprint you really motor, blitzing across the battlefield like a bat out of hell. Brawling feels tactile, too. More than once I slammed someone with my knight's big stonking sword and cackled with joy as their corpse was flung halfway across the room.

You can also time your blocks a la *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, whittling away at an enemy's posture. Once it's empty, you can trigger a satisfying counterblow by either parrying them again or hitting them with a fully-charged melee attack.

Then there's the Wither mechanic. Enemies can deal wither damage to you with certain attacks,

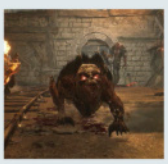




THE GANK SQUADS OF MOURNSTEAD

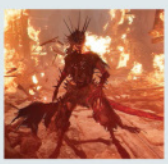
Or: my new sleep paralysis demons

CROSSBOWMEN
These buggers fire two bolts. You can get their crossbow. It fires one bolt. Hexworks? Explain.



THE DOGS
Comes in three flavours: normal, armoured, explodes when dead. All are terrible.

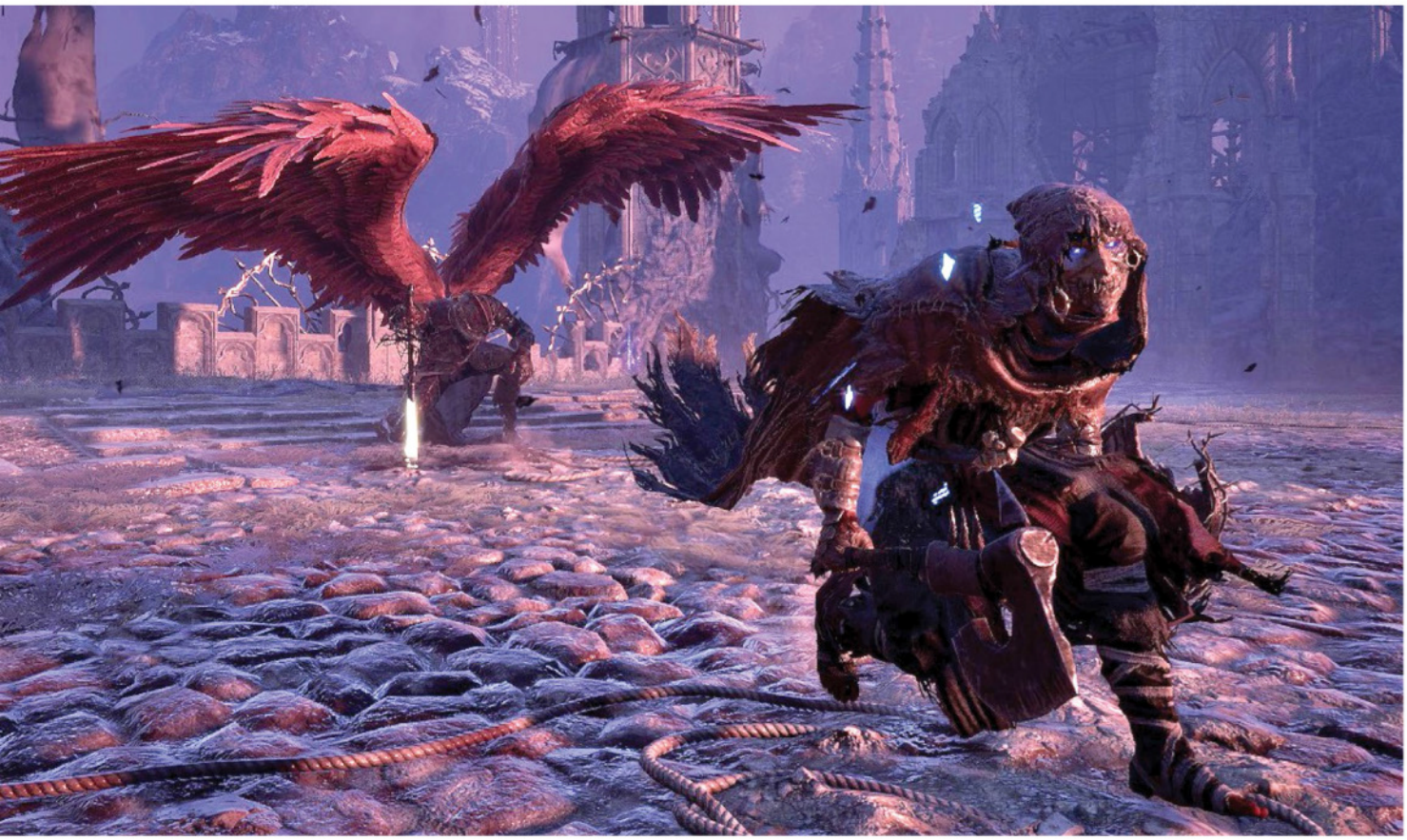
TRASH GOBLINS
Divebombs you off ledges, torpedoes you at range, and laughs at your poor taste in fashion.



HOTTEST TOPIC
Tailor-made to aggro onto you through walls and up ledges. Gets shy when you're in whackin' range.

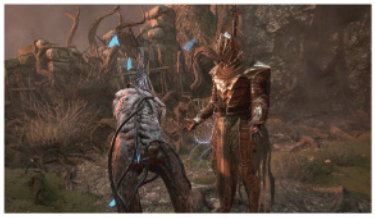
FAR LEFT: Many beasties feel ripped straight from a heavy metal album cover.

BELOW: Pieta asks me politely to stop parrying her.



RIGHT: Vestige seeds feel innovative, but just become frustrating.

FAR RIGHT: The Umbral is as pretty as it is hostile.

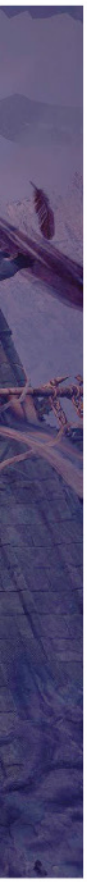


Pieta asking me impolitely to stop parrying her.

but you'll also take temporary damage if you block an attack without parrying it. Wither damage can be healed back by whacking the offending monster, but if you're hit, all your withered health is gone. This turns blocking into an engaging game of risk and reward, one to be applied as a strategy rather than in a panic.

The magic system is the cherry on top, a genuine improvement over other *Souls*-likes in almost every way. Every character comes with a ranged weapon, like a crossbow or a magic catalyst. You can enter a ranged stance that changes your usual hack-and-slash buttons into an assigned array of spells, kind of like aiming down your sights in a third-person shooter. Dipping in and out of spell-flinging is quick and nixes D-pad fumbling.

All of this – the nippy movement, the strong tactile feedback, the versatile weapon movesets, the elegant magic system, the emphasis of timed blocking – it leads to an absolutely sublime flow, the kind that's vital to a good boss fight. Fortunately, boss fights are something Hexworks has pulled off very well.



BEAUTIFUL BOSSES

It's rare that I like every single boss in a *Souls*-like game, but *Lords of the Fallen* came real close. Only one fight left a sour taste in my mouth – boiling down to 'find and kill a bunch of zombies' – but the rest were actually fantastic.

The combat system shines in the game's duels against humanoid bosses. They force you to mix up your toolset, parrying one moment, dodging the next, sprinting to avoid ranged blasts or storms of radiant arrows – coaxing you into a satisfying back-and-forth flow that hits so right.

They're also fair. *Lords of the Fallen*'s bosses are well-telegraphed, rewarding players who stay attentive and flexible in their playstyle. The Umbral Lamp also often comes into play, letting you hoover up Umbral Parasites to remove buffs, detonate landmines, create patches of healing magic and more.

One boss I fought pulled out a crossbow mid-fight to take pot shots at me. I realised those shots were perfectly timed to my character's quickstep, letting me dance left and right like I was playing a rhythm game. Weaving in between those bolts as I closed the distance was one of the most satisfying experiences I've had in a *Souls* game, period.

My only complaint is that many bosses were so fair that they became too easy. Maybe it's because I've still got that *Sekiro*-style parrying muscle memory burned into my frontal lobe. That's fine – except there's a spanner in the works. A mechanical dissonance when it comes to the rest of the game's level design, which feels at times like a pain machine devised by a wrathful god.

The sheer density of enemies is a real problem, too

A TALE OF TWO GAMES

To describe *Lords of the Fallen*'s mid-to-late game areas as simply difficult seems inaccurate. They're flooded with enemies and ambushes – with placements that occasionally feel downright cruel. In your typical *Souls*-like game, ambushes are just common enough to keep you on your toes. *Lords of the Fallen*, however, eventually made me develop an internal rule: if it looks like an ambush, it is one.

There is always an enemy behind a smashable wall, there is always an archer taking potshots at you. Long flight of stairs? Coin flip on whether someone'll punt a barrel down it. Any archer looming at the end of a hallway will have several nooks with more bad guys protecting them as a rule, not an exception. Sure, you can kite stuff, but that's not particularly engaging.

The sheer density of enemies is a real problem, too. By the halfway point, every combat encounter comes flavoured with an entourage of dogs, archers, footsoldiers, zombies, zombies that can fling fireballs – sometimes they'll just double up on the bigger, badder late-game foes, most of which have the ability to create mines, sling magic, or close the distance in a handful of frames.

It feels like a lot of these fights were built in a silo without proper consideration to the overall pacing of an area. Fortunately, further patches have seen Hexworks make adjustments to enemy density in certain pain spots. But since running around and exploring forms the bulk of a *Souls*-like game, it was enough to sour the experience for me.

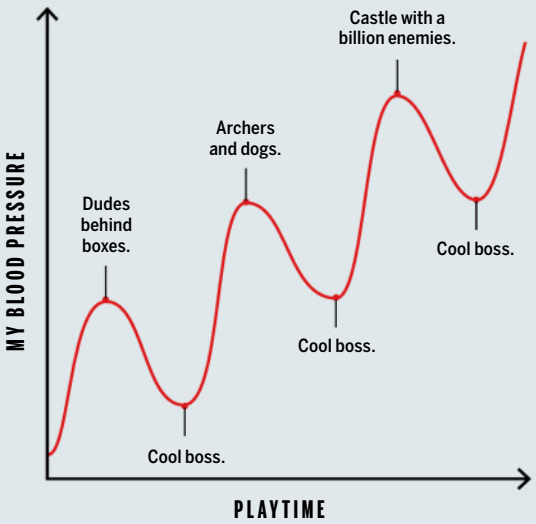
This, combined with the very even-tempered boss design, often made me feel like I was playing two games. One of them gave me fair, exciting spectacles that were a little too soft – the other wanted me dead in as many ways as possible. Personally, I think if your boss battles feel like a holiday from the rest of your game's difficulty, something's gone wrong.

Hexworks has built a base here which, with improvements to the pacing and difficulty, could genuinely go blow-for-blow with FromSoftware's games. When combat works, it flows like silk. The Umbral Lamp is a genuinely awesome addition. Despite all of this, the cogs don't link up and sing as they should, and the whole machine suffers for it. When *Lords of the Fallen*'s great, it's great – when it's bad, it's a frustrating, capricious labyrinth with a trap every five steps.

That said, if you're hankering for a new *Souls*-like game, one that goes back to the genre's sprawling megadungeon roots, *Lords of the Fallen* has a ton to offer. ■

A SCIENTIFIC DIFFICULTY GRAPH

(It's a little inconsistent)



PC GAMER VERDICT

Some of the best boss fights in the genre's recent history, riddled with difficulty spikes in all the wrong places.

79

RIGHT: Thanks for the lesson, New Guy! Now here's a lesson for you, too. Don't get terrible haircuts.

FAR RIGHT: This boss battle against a slow moving Enforcement Droid isn't great.

BELOW: Be prepared for psychological assessments between story missions.

KILLER COP

ROBOCOP: ROGUE CITY's engaging, hyper-violent combat only takes it so far

By Noah Smith

RoboCop: Rogue City's combat feels like straight up murder: I totally lost it when I punched someone for the first time and RoboCop's fist flew out with the force of a particle accelerator, instantly atomising their skull. A few minutes later I had to take a breather after picking up a dumpster and squashing four guys into a corner with it, like it was a malevolent hydraulic press adorned with Oakley and Punisher skull stickers.

There is a tremendous sense of physicality in *Rogue City*. You can pick up enemies by the neck and fling them against walls so hard that chunks of rubble will rain down on their ragdolled corpses. Bullets scatter reams of paper and turn clutter into hurricanes of plastic and metal. Environments are littered with a comical number of explosives, too, that behave in hilariously different ways. A propane canister will bonk against the head of whoever you throw it at and then rocket around the area before exploding. RoboCop can pick up landmines and whip them like frisbees.

I loved the way RoboCop's Auto-9 machine pistol handles, a modular burst fire SMG that just vomits a ridiculous stream of small calibre rounds with pinpoint accuracy. I could go for another whole campaign of doming someone with a full burst and watching their body ragdoll backwards in slow motion.

Yes, *Rogue City* has a skill tree system, and it's way too bloated. My advice: get the first tier of every ability ASAP, because they're the juice that keeps *Rogue City*'s combat from getting repetitive. There's *Max Payne*-esque bullet time, flashbangs in your eyes and, my favourite, a forward charge which sees RoboCop plant his feet and surge ahead like a flat-footed freight train, bowling over everyone in his path.

This is made all the better by a dismemberment system that seems to prioritise the funniest outcomes possible, enemies clutching their mutilated stumps and crying out, "My hand!" There's even some ragdoll magnetism, where shooting some jobber standing by a ledge will cause him to tumble over, arms and legs flailing.

Environments are littered with a comical number of explosives

REPEAT OFFENDER

It all starts to fall apart though when *Rogue City* introduces enemies that don't explode with gore – there's a god-awful boss fight against a malfunctioning ED-209 early on, and since you're both two giant, slow-moving tin cans packing nearly identical heat, it boils down to RoboCop awkwardly clambering around the arena taking cover behind too-small pillars.

Between missions you return to the precinct to undergo routine psychological assessments, help fellow officers shuffle papers and just sort of putter around, taking in the sights from the film. The side missions have RoboCop trundling through garbage heaps and pools of water that obscure HP-shredding landmines. It's arduous, and the payoff is rarely worth it either.

The most human character is ironically RoboCop himself, voiced by the returning Peter Weller. *Rogue City* opens with RoboCop suffering a PTSD episode during a hostage crisis, leaving him chipped like a dog and run through a gauntlet of mechanical and psychological checks while being dressed down. There's a stark contrast between the absurd, bombastic, power fantasy action and the utterly emasculating experience of being strapped down and screamed at by your idiot boss.

Technically, *RoboCop: Rogue City* is fine, hovering around 60fps on high settings on my mid-grade build. It's no looker, but when the bullets start flying and the bodies start piling up by the dozens, *Rogue City* holds strong, rarely dropping below 45 frames. Character animations range from 'fine' to 'bad', and the environments faithfully capture the look of the original film.

Ultimately *Rogue City* doesn't rise above its B-game status in the way that RoboCop transcended its B-movie origins. Too often the joy of wasting goons is cut short or delayed by plodding police busywork that rarely plays to the game's strength – character writing. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Narrative FPS based on the classic film

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Teyon

PUBLISHER
Nacon

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700G, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6600

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shorturl.at/jpLRZ

OCP CRIME PREVENTION UNIT 001

Dead or alive, you're coming with me!

1 AUTO 9 MACHINE PISTOL
Fire bursts of 9x19mm Parabellum rounds. Good at exploding skulls.

2 ROBO HANDS
Good for grabbing goons and punks by the neck and throwing them through windows.

3 ARMOURED CROTCH
Well, he may largely be machine, but Murphy is still all man, and wants to stay that way.

PC GAMER VERDICT

RoboCop: Rogue City's fantastic shootouts are held back by a dull narrative and bloated pacing.

65

NIGHT TERRORS

ALAN WAKE 2 is a wild barrage of creative storytelling and visual flair

By Robin Valentine

In the first playable moments of *Alan Wake 2*, you control a naked, balding, middle-aged man stumbling in confusion around a forest. After a few seconds of staring at his hairy bottom while I guided him around, it dawned on me that this wasn't going to be your typical big-budget videogame.

Even by Remedy's own quirky standards, *Alan Wake 2* is idiosyncratic. You could call it self-indulgent, even, as it dives headfirst into its every strange idea. Weaving a winkingly meta journey through all corners of the studio's lore, at times it feels like watching Remedy get high off its own fumes. Which is exactly what makes it so enthrallingly brilliant.

The game picks up 13 years after writer Alan Wake's disappearance at the end of the first game, following both his continuing attempts to escape the mysterious Dark Place – a dimension of psychological nightmare – and the investigations of new protagonist Saga Anderson, an FBI agent sent to the backwoods town of Bright Falls to find the culprits behind a series of ritual murders. You play as both characters, each following their own story threads that parallel and interweave with each other, and you can switch between them at set points, allowing you to experience the two journeys in your own unique order.

Keeps you on edge and makes you work for your moments of respite

SHADOW PLAY

Though the story continues almost uninterrupted from the first game, tonally things feel very different in Bright Falls. Alan Wake was the sort of game I'd call spooky rather than scary; *Alan Wake 2* is proper survival horror, full of brutal encounters, nail-bitingly tense delves into darkness, and surprisingly gory violence. For both Saga in the real world and Alan in the Dark Place, staying alive means managing your ammo and resources, and carefully deploying sources of light to keep the monstrous Taken at bay and burn away their shadowy defences.

It's a game of tension and release; long stretches of quiet, building fear, punctuated by short bursts of violence and panic. Brilliantly impactful, satisfying gunplay helps that structure sing – when you hit a Taken's weak spot, you really know about it, as the booming shot rings out, smokey shadows blast out of the wound, and the creature recoils back. That is, until it shrugs off having half its torso blasted away and starts advancing on you again.

The game keeps you on edge and makes you work for your moments of respite. For me, the most frightening enemy in the game ended up being the wolves that lurk in the forest outside Bright Falls. They're not even that monstrous, and they don't take that much to put down, but the way they stalk you – circling you in the undergrowth, looking for an opening to leap at you, before retreating back out of sight until their next opportunity – leads to wonderfully memorable games of cat-and-mouse.

Remedy knows action – it has been making creative, satisfying

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A surreal survival horror sequel that also ties into *Control*, and Remedy's other past games

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Epic Games Publishing

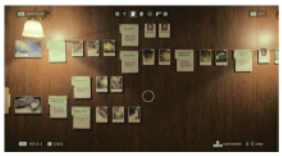
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce RTX 3080

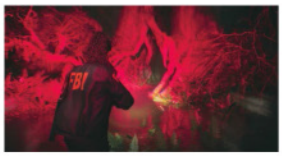
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
alanwake.com

ABOVE: Navigating the game's semi-open areas can be a little tricky, but the maps have a lovely papery feel.

Shawn Ashmore returns from *Quantum Break* to play a character called Tim Breaker. Yes, really.





ABOVE: Arranging clues on Saga's investigation wall is a brilliantly satisfying way of digesting the complex story.

FAR RIGHT: The live action sequences are wonderfully well produced, with excellent performances.

combat systems since 2001's *Max Payne*. What does show through sometimes, however, is that the studio isn't as experienced with the broader experience of survival horror. The quiet stretches between fights are long enough that they give you too much opportunity to scavenge and get over-equipped for encounters. When enemies do arrive, they can feel disappointingly bland – generic possessed humans lacking in the kind of visual imagination or story build-up of for example a *Resident Evil* game's bestiary.

But even if the survival horror elements don't always feel fully complete, that's much less of an issue than you might think, because really the action is only one part of what's on offer here. What Remedy is more preoccupied with in *Alan Wake 2* is its storytelling, and it's one of the most fascinating, strange, and creatively told narratives I've ever experienced in a videogame.

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

As in the first game, the horror and madness descending on Bright Falls is driven by an evil force that piggybacks on art and fiction, distorting reality into whatever fits the narrative it's following. It's a wonderful excuse for the game to get meta, blurring the lines between the story the game is telling you, the story Alan has written, and references to our own world and

CANON BARRAGE

To fully understand the story, make sure you've played...

MAX PAYNE 2001
Though Remedy can't pull Max in directly, Alex Casey is a stand-in and his story works a lot better if you're familiar with Payne as a character.

ALAN WAKE 2010
Obviously the most important touchstone – *AW2* follows on from the events of the first game and many key characters return. Play the DLCs too.

ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE 2012
This spin-off sets up Alan's quest to escape the Dark Place.

CONTROL 2019
Make sure to play this and its *Alan Wake*-themed DLC – it's all set in the same universe as *AW2* and there are lots of very direct connections.

TOP: Saga and Alex pull into town to investigate a series of ritual murders, but quickly get drawn into even stranger events.

ABOVE: Saga can switch between the real world and her 'Mind Place', a room in her imagination where she organises her thoughts and deductions.

Remedy's past games. What's the real backstory of Saga and the other new characters, and what has been altered to make them better players in a horror story? Did real events inspire the fiction, or did the fiction retroactively create the real events? Are these real people at all, or completely fictional constructs?

It can certainly be overwrought and convoluted, but there's a kind of infectious enthusiasm to Remedy's house style, and it's more evident than ever here. The game is bursting with ideas, and it wants to show you every single one, all mashed together into one gloriously absorbing tangle. This is a game where the real life creative director, Sam Lake, provides the face for a character called Alex Casey, an incarnation of Max Payne who is simultaneously a real FBI agent, a character from an Alan Wake book and the lead in a movie where he's played by an in-universe Sam Lake. And that's just scratching the surface of it.

What keeps it all on the right side of fun rather than pretentious is how willing Remedy is to punctuate its big ideas with a laugh. *Alan Wake 2* is frightening and in its serious moments atmospheric and dramatic, but it's also the funniest game I've played this year. It's brilliantly good at finding the humour both in over-the-top absurdity – such as a musical sequence that has to be seen to be believed – and in the quiet and

NIGHT SPRINGS ETERNAL

Remedy has already announced post-launch support

NEW GAME+ AND PHOTO MODE

Not out at time of writing, but should be by the time you're reading this if all has gone well. NG+ lets you carry over weapons and upgrades, but also changes elements of the story for a new experience.

NIGHT SPRINGS

Planned for spring 2024, this expansion will let you play out a series of side stories starring "familiar characters", each presented as self-contained episodes of Night Springs, the setting's Twilight Zone-esque TV show.

THE LAKE HOUSE

The release date for the second expansion is still TBC, but what we do know is it will involve exploring a Federal Bureau of Control facility built to study the supernatural events at Cauldron Lake.

very personal oddities of a small town community. At its best, it weaves horror, and comedy directly together – I did not expect one of the game's most fascinating and disturbing little mysteries to kick off with a local radio host announcing his show's beef jerky sponsorship ("flavours include hickory smoked, teriyaki and hickory smoked teriyaki").

It's hugely enhanced as well by the many creative techniques the game uses to tell its story. Far from just sitting you down and making you watch cutscenes, it's constantly experimenting with new ways to draw you in. Off-kilter live action sequences are interspersed throughout, often elegantly incorporated into in-engine sequences. Saga's detective work involves creating your own investigation corkboards, connecting clues into webs of fact and speculation. Radio excerpts, TV commercials, photographs, original songs, manuscript pages, and more add colour and detail – at one point you can even settle down in a haunted cinema and watch a full horror short film in Finnish. You're simply barraged with cool stuff to watch, listen to, and interact with.

It certainly doesn't hurt that all of this is presented with such visual craft and flair. Its use of light and shadow isn't quite as striking as the first game's was back in 2010, but it's a proper 2023 technical powerhouse. The fantastically detailed graphics are impressive throughout – particularly the animation of the characters, whose appearances are so realistic, and their movements and facial expressions so believable, that the game is able to blend in-engine interactions with live-action sequences near-seamlessly. The recommended specs are definitely intimidating as a result, however – it ran perfectly smoothly on my relatively beefy PC (RTX 3080, Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM), but only with a mix of medium and high graphics settings, with ray-tracing turned off and AI upscaling helping out on the resolution side. I do have to wonder how many players actually exist who'll have the hardware to experience these visuals at their very, very best.

Off-kilter live action sequences are interspersed throughout

FINNISH LINE

Where *Control* prodded at the idea of a shared Remedy universe, *Alan Wake 2* revels in it, and in some ways it feels like the start of something bigger. The story plays with elements of not just the first game and its spin-off, but also *Control*, *Max Payne*, and even to a small degree *Quantum Break*. Newcomers will likely find themselves confused, but all that extra lore is used to add wonderful new depth and texture to the *Alan Wake* mythology – the cold and bureaucratic approach to the supernatural that the Federal Bureau of Control brings in particularly helps to ground the events at Bright Falls in some kind of wider reality.

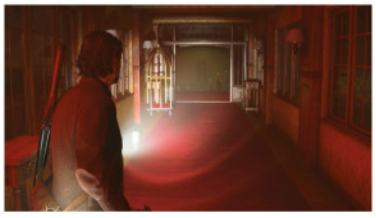
And in this confluence of all of its games, it feels like Remedy's personality shines through brighter than ever. I was struck particularly by how unapologetically Nordic the game is. Remedy is based in Finland, and though that's always influenced the stories it tells, before now its American inspirations have been at the forefront. *Alan Wake 2* may still be set in Washington, but this time it's as much a game about Finnish culture and Nordic mythology as it is a tribute to Twin Peaks and Stephen King.

That feels like a symptom of a Remedy that's more confident and more independent than ever, and that's something that colours the entire experience of *Alan Wake 2*. This is a studio with a truly unique perspective, indulging all of its wildest ideas and grandest ambitions, and though you couldn't call it focused or restrained, it's a glorious sprawl of surreal horror to explore. It's rare that a game of this scope is allowed to be so completely itself, and the result is an experience that will stay with you long after you've seen every terrifying encounter, cheesy manuscript page, and quirky local TV commercial it has to offer. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Alan Wake 2* is Remedy's boldest videogame experiment yet, and is surreal, creative and genuinely frightening.**

88



ABOVE: Facial animations are brilliantly detailed and subtle.

SECOND CONTACT

STAR TREK: INFINITE is Stellaris, but not as we know it

By Tom Hatfield

I am opening this review with a warning: I am going to spend a lot of time here talking about a different game. This isn't something I usually do, but as you may have guessed from the screenshots *Infinite* is very much built on the chassis of *Stellaris*, with some appropriately Star Trek twists. Consider it the *Napoleon: Total War* to *Stellaris' Empire: Total War* – a more focused, narrative spin off from a larger and more sprawling game.

The game is set firmly in the Next Generation/Deep Space Nine era and portrays the Federation, Klingons, Romulans and Cardassians as four superpowers locked in constant competition. It's not unlike joining a *Stellaris* game a third of the way in. For the most part this works surprisingly well, but there are some oddities: for example playing as the Federation I was prompted to colonise the uninhabited planet of Denobula. I know, Nimble Giant, I like to pretend Enterprise never existed too.

Here's the good news: *Star Trek Infinite* expresses the Federation fantasy far better than *Stellaris* ever did. You can genuinely expand by diplomacy here, buttering up minor species and inviting them, one by one. The other playable factions have their own spins on this, like setting up puppet governments as the Romulans.

One of the other big changes from *Stellaris* will be familiar to players of other Paradox games: there's now a narrative structure to the game in the form of a branching mission tree where events can be triggered by objectives as exciting as "have Bajor join the federation" or as banal as "survey ten systems". They're as much about steering your playstyle as getting the rewards, and I ended up enjoying them a great deal.

One of the best of these mission chains is the Enterprise itself. Completing the first step will reward you with a jack of all trades super ship that is equally adept at science, war and diplomacy. Sending the Enterprise out to do various tasks will reward you with a Next Generation crew member. Other major and minor Trek characters can also emerge in this fashion, meaning that, entirely organically, I once ended up in a situation where the Enterprise was valiantly holding the line against an unstoppable Borg sphere, only to be rescued by Benjamin Sisko commanding a fleet of Voyagers.

I want to see if I can evacuate the Romulans before their sun explodes

At this point I have to talk about the targ in the room. *Stellaris* already has a Star Trek mod, so why should you pay for a game when a mod is free? Well *Stellaris' New Horizons* mod is a sprawling epic that covers the entirety of Star Trek history and every faction in the galaxy, while *Infinite* is focused on the Alpha and Beta quadrants of the Next Generation era, and frankly I think it's better for it. It's also, paradoxically, the cheaper option if you don't already own a full deck of *Stellaris* DLC.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Paradox style grand strategy, but Star Trek

EXPECT TO PAY
£27

DEVELOPER
Nimble Giant

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

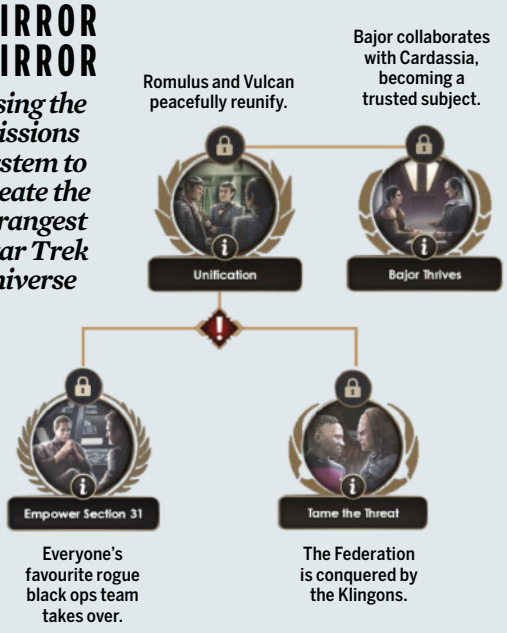
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-4670k, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1660

MULTIPLAYER
Online PVP

LINK
paradoxinteractive.com/games/star-trek-infinite

MIRROR MIRROR

Using the missions system to create the strangest Star Trek universe

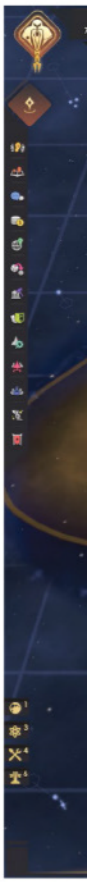


LESS CLUNKY

Something *Infinite* should have over any mod is polish, and while it does feel less clunky than *New Horizons*, there are still more issues than there should be at launch. Like a decidedly un-silent notification for a silent alarm, or the strange bug that caused the voiceover to claim a character had died every five minutes, or the time I ended up with two Rikers. Although to be fair that last one also happened in the show.

It's things like this, and the more direct ports from *Stellaris*, that make *Infinite* feel a little unfinished. I don't mind that Nimble Giant haven't really changed the planet building interface, but I feel like I probably shouldn't be trading energy credits for alloys as the famously post capitalist Federation. There's also a disappointing lack of interactions with pre-FTL civilisations.

Nevertheless at the end of every review I ask myself, "Do I still want to play this game some more?" and the answer here is yes. I really do want to try that reunification story arc, I want to see if I can evacuate the Romulans before their sun explodes this time (sorry guys), I want to actually get the Enterprise E before Jean-Luc Picard dies of old age. ■

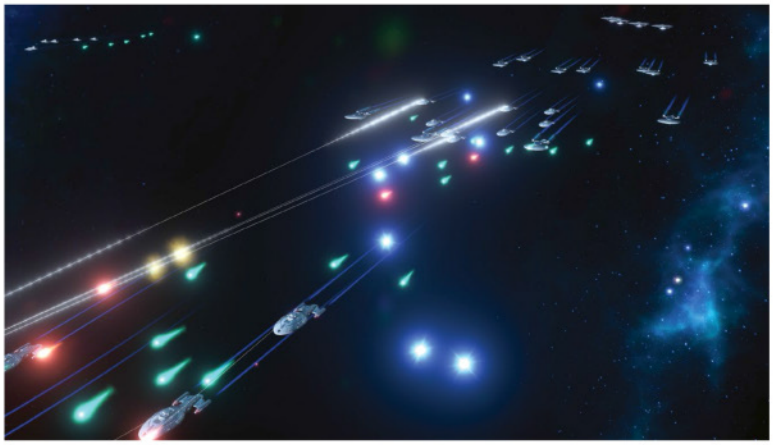


PC GAMER VERDICT

***Star Trek: Infinite* is compelling, but not quite there yet. It really needs a couple of seasons to grow the beard.**

72

I wondered why Nausicaan pirates kept attacking until I realised the Romulans probably paid them.



FAR LEFT: "What the hell guys, I thought we all agreed on red torpedoes today."

BELOW: Bajor always starts the game occupied, and positioned between Cardassia and the Federation.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

We're still waiting on that Seinfeld adventure game, but this is a great consolation prize.

SHRINK-WRAPPED

Tossed salads and random battles in FRASIER FANTASY

Frasier is back. Yes, in a new TV series, but also in this fan game, which takes the neurotic radio shrink and drops him into a turn-based JRPG. It does sort of make sense – a '90s sitcom being turned into a '90s-style game – but is it actually worth playing, beyond the gag of its mere existence? To cut to the chase: yes. This is one of the best fan games I've played.

The setup is that Frasier is hosting one of his dinner parties, but there's a to-do list before he is finally ready. He needs his crotchety dad Martin, and his dog Eddie, out of his apartment; he needs his grape scissors back from his brother Niles; and he has to host his radio show down at the station. Cue turn-based battles (but not very many), simple stealth and sparkling dialogue, in an adventure that hits all the classic Frasier beats.

You'll visit his apartment, Café Nervosa, KACL and even Niles' house, the latter inciting a hilarious boss battle with Niles' never-seen (not even here, technically) wife Maris. Seattle is rendered in the style of a Game Boy game, and everyone kind of looks like their show counterparts. However, the dialogue is so shot-through with attention to detail that you can tell this was made by someone who loves the show.

CRANE MAN

There are deep-cuts of Frasier lore everywhere, from Maris' summon attacks in your boss fight against her (she trots out her house staff to wound you, which is exactly what Maris would do), to subtler references from the callers to Frasier's radio show. Unlike a traditional JRPG – which has to offer dozens of hours of content to justify the price tag – *Frasier Fantasy* is free to be a half-hour-long amuse-bouche, and it never has time to drop in quality or outstay its welcome. You move from one set-piece to another, occasionally fighting enemies in turn-based combat – and even this is given a delightfully Frasier twist.

Edward La Barbera has made a comedy of sibling rivalry

As Frasier is a psychiatrist, his special attacks take the form of 'therapy', as he spouts lines of psychobabble that can put an enemy to sleep. This therapy works, most of the time – until it falters in front of a memorable boss, in a frankly sublime climactic battle that really gets to the heart of Frasier's character.

Developer Edward La Barbera has made a comedy of sibling rivalry, pretension and dinner-based farces work as a JRPG. No small feat, but do you need to be a Frasier fan to enjoy it? I think you probably do, yes, as the story is a bit too compacted to make much sense on its own, while the game's best moments are mainly notable for who you're fighting and how they're doing it. A pity, perhaps, but as a diehard Frasierhead I'm having enormous fun. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A short JRPG fan game set in the Frasier/Cheers connected universe

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Edward La Barbera

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/FrasierFantasy

PC GAMER VERDICT

A polished, hilarious fan game that makes great use of its source material. But best for Frasier fans, obviously.

79

BELOW: One-hit deaths keep you on your toes.

THE LOST LEVELS

MR PLATFORMER is a sidescroller that really goes places

Mr *Platformer* takes a very strange turn, but for most of its runtime it's just a good platform game, with a simplicity that's refreshing in an era of Metroidvanias and platforming roguelikes. With its low-res art and short, challenging stages, it plays like *Mario* if it was demade for the ZX Spectrum.

Each stage is themed around a platforming facet, be it *Pitfall!*-style vine swinging, *Mario*-esque swimming, or hunting keys in an underground environment, but every time you reach the final stage, there's a curious horror vibe – and then you're thrown back to the start of the world map. Things are different now, however. Completed stages have been wiped from the map, replaced with others. And when you beat a stage, a timer counts down – but to what?

Even now that I've finished the game, I'm not sure how to describe what happens, but it feels a little like cosmic horror – or *Mario*'s idea of cosmic horror, anyway. There's a growing desolation that practically inverts the premise of the game, and it's all the more chilling as the phenomena is never explained.

It's not often that a platformer is so ambiguous, so dreamlike and, in the end, nightmarish. This is a game that leaves a strong final impression, but even if you stop before it all goes pear-shaped, I think you'll have a pretty enjoyable time. The platforming basics are handled well, transporting me back to the days of Mario flagpoles and instant demises – but without the sky-high difficulty of *Super Meat Boy*. *Mr Platformer* is sometimes difficult, but ultimately doable by actual mortals. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Terry Cavanagh	bit.ly/MrPlatformer

LOOPER

Live, die, repeat in puzzle game TEST TEST TEST

I love a good timeloop, and *Test Test Test*'s will take some doing to unravel. It's a cryptic, real-time adventure game in which you have 15 minutes to prepare your files for an important work meeting. Fail to retrieve all three files and you'll be fired – with a bullet to the head.

But the moment the bullet lands, time reverts to 11:45. Armed with a little more knowledge each time you reset, can you solve the mysteries of your ominous work environment, find that elusive third folder, and finally please your shadowy bosses?

Well, yes, partly – it's an ending that mostly preserves the mystery – but there is a way, a sequence of devious puzzles, that ultimately brings the timeloop to a close. Puzzles begin simply, as you decipher an anagram on a note and try to get somewhere by a specific time, but before long you're thinking outside the box – outside the game, even – as you follow clues laid by a time-trapped version of yourself, all while battling that harsh time limit.

I relied on help from a YouTube walkthrough, and I doubt I would have made its deductive leaps if I'd persevered on my own. Sometimes, puzzles seemed ingenious in hindsight – generally, the ones where you're doing things in-game – while the ones that brought in an external source seemed needlessly drawn-out and laborious, and I was relieved I hadn't devoted the brainpower to figuring them out. Compounding things is the time limit, as small mistakes will often mean resetting the loop, and plodding through the opening sections before you can return to the puzzle. ■

68

BELOW: You begin each loop in your flat.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Mojiken Studio	bit.ly/TestMojiken

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

I think I speak for all of us when I say 'fuck this one room in particular'.

CITY LICKERS

How your memory betrays you in RESIDENT EVIL 2

There's a technique in movies called the Lewton Bus, first used in Jacques Tourneur's 1942 horror, Cat People. It works by slowly building tension, then rapidly dissipating it with a jumpscare; in the case of Cat People, the hissing brakes of a bus. The technique, named after producer Val Lewton, has been used in countless films since.

The Lewton Bus is so omnipresent, in fact, that directors now use it as a double bluff, following up a harmless jumpscare with another, more threatening reveal. Most of the *Resident Evil 2* remake is one long Lewton Bus. It's the gaming equivalent of hearing a noise which turns out to be a cute cat, which then erupts into a mewling, blasphemous malformation of claws, pus and bloodied furballs. It's a game that plays with our collective expectations, teasing us with what we might remember from playing the original.

Perhaps the best update of all, however, is how meaty the zombies feel. There was always an initial rush of fear playing *Resi* as a milquetoast youth, but once you've met Lickers and giant spiders, the shambling dead seem more like an inconvenience than a threat. It's different here. They soak up bullets and block up corridors, like elderly people arguing with self-service checkouts. That would be unpleasant enough in a game that's all about conserving ammo, but the constant threat of Mr X changes everything. It's easy enough to run away from him, as obvious and cumbersome as he sometimes is, but zombies become more dangerous when you start sprinting blindly around. Combine this with the fact he's drawn to the sound of gunfire, and you face an excruciating decision: do you risk wasting ammo, gunning down zombies to keep the corridors clear? Or do you live with a sense of unease, listening for the sound of thudding footsteps as the behatted sentient caboose clomps about like sulking dad in a loft.

> **"Do you risk gunning down zombies to keep the corridors clear?"**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The Balenciaga meme reimaging of the original *Resident Evil 2*

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/883710/Resident_Evil_2

GHOUL ME ONCE

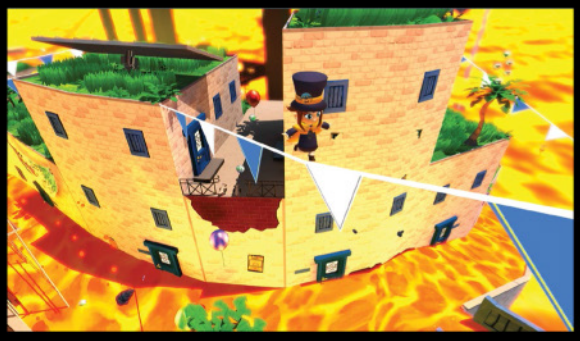
This is the beauty of the remake. It's different enough that it's worth playing again, yet familiar in all the right ways. There are still wonderfully impractical puzzles to solve, and there will always be something reassuring about a functioning police station that uses playing card-themed locks ("Sgt Boggins is locked in there with a cannibal... but we've lost the Diamond Key!") The game even finds time to explain what the esoteric objects all mean. And, elsewhere, the remake uses our existing knowledge to torture us, such as the previously-safe lobby of the police station being full of zombies in the B scenario. There's nowhere to relax in Raccoon City, however well you know it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The *Resi 2* remake is a thoughtful way of dragging a resolutely old-fashioned game to modern platforms.

88

BELOW: Is it even a 3D platformer if you don't have vast expanses of lava?



MILLINER TO ONE

A HAT IN TIME is a head above other platformers

PC gaming has never really had a mascot. You could argue that it's Commander Keen, or perhaps even Kate Archer from *No One Lives Forever*. But in terms of a cute, cartoony avatar with universal appeal, the closest we've come is Gordon Freeman braining aliens with a crowbar.

A Hat In Time isn't a PC exclusive, but there's something about it that feels like it should be. The protagonist, Hat Girl – literally a human girl in a hat – could easily sit alongside the likes of Sypro, Ratchet, or Gex. And the entire feel of it, from the bouncy, buttery platforming to the eccentric sense of humour, directly references the first and second wave of 3D platformers. This might be to do with the game's development history: it was crowdfunded on Kickstarter, so it feels like a nostalgic labour of love built with a limited budget. The backgrounds sometimes feel soft and spongy, and there's a lack of visual cohesion that gives it the chaotic feel of an excitable child's homemade comic book. But that lack of polish is strangely endearing, especially as we watch the game industry implode because of spiralling development costs. The idea that a small team could make a game so deft and dense is a reassuring one. This often has a Nintendo-adjacent degree of panache and generosity, with an overwhelming amount of unlockable powers and some wonderfully diverse worlds to explore. There's something about it that feels like loving homage rather than raw originality, but you can't ignore the technical ability or love for the original material. ■

78

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£25	Gears for Breakfast	Gears for Breakfast

PENITENT PALS

Suffering in silence with BLASPHEMOUS

This month's theme, rather desperately, is hats. Now, I realise that the helmet the Penitent One wears in *Blasphemous* isn't so much a hat as it is a barbed wire vuvuzela of stinging Catholic guilt. But it's all the excuse I needed to talk about the sort of game that makes Warhammer 40K's Imperium of Man look like a Christian line-dancing troupe.

Blasphemous is horrible, in a way that makes even *Dark Souls* seem cheerful. At least in Lordran you'll eventually stumble on a jolly, rotund knight or cackling pedlar. In Cvstodia, the best you can hope for is giant babies sobbing blood or floating heads with the flesh sloughing off their faces. But there's something deeper about *Blasphemous*' fervent misery that makes it more gruelling. Everyone and everything seems to be in pain. Even the act of healing is upsetting, forcing you to smash vials of blood in your face. It shouldn't feel that weird, given that many folk in Western countries grew up metaphorically eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ, but it absolutely does. And, in fact, perhaps that's why the game is more unsettling than flat-out horror fare like *The Evil Within*: there's a cultural familiarity here that gives everything a sense of inescapable dread. The result is something that feels like chancing upon a frightening Doré bible as a child: a mix of guilt, horror, curiosity, and thrilling confusion. The Metroidvania construction keeps you wanting to push further on. Thematically, then, it's a sinful pleasure, even if the platforming and balance of attacks isn't always quite so satisfying. ■

74

BELOW: The helmet is based on the capirote.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£5	The Game Kitchen	Team 17

Out Now

STEAM XBOX SERIES X|S PS5

A desert gardening survival game. Start from a tiny spring and cultivate a blooming garden. Explore a vast world amid the sands and uncover its mysteries. Can you defend against the relentless forces of nature and mysterious wraith corruption, to bring life to a dying world?

MUSE GAMES

kwalee Gaming

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

104
BUYER'S GUIDE
Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.

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GROUP TEST
Six next-gen gaming keyboards reviewed.

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TECH REPORT
Can VR chat make PC gaming better?

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TECH TALES
The art of learning to love imperfect framerates.

GROUP TEST

NEXT-GEN GAMING KEYBOARDS

Move over membrane, make way mechanical: these gaming keyboards use light or magnets to deliver a more rapid and reliable response.

By Jacob Ridley

The two trends taking the gaming keyboard world by storm today are optical and magnetic key switches. Both claim to offer something similar: a more reliable and more customisable keyboard. Though to the extent they deliver is up to how manufacturers use each one, and some make far better use of these clever new switches than others.

Take Wooting. This small company has crafted entirely analogue gaming keyboards out of optical switches and has moved on to even better magnetic ones.

Two HE

WOOTING £177

Tweaker's delight

Wooting aims to offer a properly analogue gaming keyboard. That is, a gaming keyboard that can measure the full range of its keys' motion. As a player you can use this keyboard to alter between walking and running in a game by only adjusting how far you depress the W key. Or even have a half key-press do one thing and a full key-press do another.

There are heaps of potential use cases for analogue keys, though note that not every game works great with Wooting's special brew. That said, there are some other benefits to a board such as this, like adjustable actuation, remapped reset points, low input lag mode, and multi-action shortcuts on a single key. One of the reasons I love the Wooting is for its excellent app. For one, you don't even have to download it onto your PC as it works in-browser. It's also really easy to use, and shows up most major manufacturers that can't seem to nail down a good software package. Wooting, a pretty tiny team by comparison, does software really well.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Amazing software
- So many options
- Good value for money

SPECS SIZE: FULL / **SWITCH:** LEKKER HALL EFFECT / **ACTUATION:** 0.1–4 MM / **KEYCAPS:** ABS/PBT / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB

60HE

WOOTING £168

Small but powerful

Since Wooting is at the forefront of these new-wave gaming keyboards it feels only fitting to also include its smallest board, the 60HE. At just 60% the size of a regular gaming keyboard, you have to learn to work with a lot fewer keys than normal. That can get a little overwhelming day-to-day, but if you manage to get your head around all the shortcuts there's tons of customisation to unlock.

Much like the Wooting Two HE, the 60HE uses Hall effect keys to offer ultimate flexibility in how you use it. You can opt for analogue inputs to use your keyboard more like a controller, or you could set up multiple macros or shortcuts to each key. If you can master lightly tapping on your keys for one action and hammering them hard for another, you're effectively doubling your key count. Though that's easier said than done.

Still, the 60HE also benefits from the superb app and excellent build quality – the makings of any other great gaming keyboard.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Loads of shortcut potential
- A tiny footprint
- Not the easiest to use

SPECS SIZE: 60% / **SWITCH:** LEKKER HALL EFFECT / **ACTUATION:** 0.1–4 MM / **KEYCAPS:** ABS/PBT / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB

GROUP TEST

K70 Max

CORSAIR **£220**

Magnetic appeal

3 Corsair isn't doing nearly as much with its magnetic switches as Wooting. That said, I like this keyboard more than I thought I would for its competitive gaming credentials.

You can adjust the actuation between 0.4mm and 3.6mm, which makes it snappier than MX Speed switches on the one hand, which actuate at 1.2mm, and seriously tough to mistype on on the other. Corsair has also fitted this board with an 8,000Hz polling rate, which may seem overkill to some but contributes to this board's spectacularly quick response – it'd be tough to blame it for your losing streak in *Valorant*.

My main gripe with the K70 Max is how it feels to type on. It's loud, clunky, and has nothing on the lubed switches found on some traditional mech boards today. It's also pretty expensive – Corsair didn't miss a beat charging heaps for this more adjustable keyboard. Though I can see why for the competitive gamer this board above all has a magnetic appeal.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Rapid response
- Lovely lighting
- Not for heavy typists

SPECS SIZE: FULL / **SWITCH:** CORSAIR MGX / **ACTUATION:** 0.4–3.6MM / **KEYCAPS:** PBT / **POLLING RATE:** 8,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB

Vulcan II Max

ROCCAT **£206**

Eye-melting

4 Phwoar, this is one helluva bright keyboard. Roccat has put together a real stunner in the Vulcan II Max, and I mean that literally. It will actually stun you with how bright it is, thanks to dual-LED RGB lighting. It's a mighty bright slab of keys – not only for having twice the LEDs present than most, but also the thin keycaps that only cover the very tippy-top of the switch. The rest of the switch housing is transparent to allow as much light to gush fourth into your eyeballs. These dual-LED switches can also act as little indicators for various PC functions, such as telling you if you've muted your microphone. Though this keyboard is in this list for its optical credentials, these optical switches aren't used for much beyond the basic, latent upgrade they offer over mechanical switches. They're more durable but the actuation is stuck at 1.4mm for the red-style linear switch or 1.7mm for the brown-style tactile switch. A little disappointing for its lacklustre optical switch features, but at least it looks killer.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- It looks the part
- Requires two USB ports
- App needs a revamp

SPECS SIZE: FULL / **SWITCH:** TITAN II / **ACTUATION:** 1.4–1.7MM / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY DUAL-LED RGB

5
3
MAGNETIC SWITCHES ARE ONLY ONE OF THE PRO'S STRENGTHS

WHAT'S NEW INSIDE THE SWITCH?

Magnetic
The Hall effect, first discovered in the late 19th century by Edwin Hall, is fundamental to magnetic key switches. Don't worry, you don't need to know much about electromagnetism to understand how a Hall effect keyboard works. Rather than using a physical metal contact to measure a key press, a magnet and a sensor are used. The benefit of a Hall effect switch is you can measure the distance a key is depressed and adjust the actuation.

Optical
Optical switches use a sensor and a light signal to register a key press. They're a slightly more durable mechanical switch, in that they offer the same on/off functionality without the physical contact found in a mechanical switch. Though with some clever tweaks and smart design, they can be fast and highly adjustable, like a magnetic switch.

Apex Pro TKL Wireless

STEELSERIES **£229**

Screens everywhere

5 Unlike its optical cousin, the Apex 9 TKL, you can put the magnetic switches in the Apex Pro TKL to good use. Not only can you choose any actuation point between 0.2mm and 3.8mm, which is a wide range to choose from, but you can also run each key with dual functions, a feature I've not seen widely adopted much beyond Wooting's boards.

Magnetic switches are only one of the Pro's strengths. The other lies in the little OLED screen squeezed onto the uppermost right corner of the keyboard. This may seem over the top, and sure there's a good case to be made that it is, but it's extremely useful for keeping track of your per-game profiles, set in the SteelSeries app. Also you can put little logos and images on there. What I'm not so happy about is the price tag. It's a lot for a tenkeyless and made worse by the wireless functionality on this specific model. You can pick up the wired model for a lot less, and honestly a wireless keyboard isn't as essentially as with a headset or mouse.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Lil' OLED screen
- Adjustable actuation
- Wireless will cost you

SPECS SIZE: TENKEYLESS / **SWITCH:** OMNIPOINT 2.0 / **ACTUATION:** 0.2–3.8MM / **KEYCAPS:** PBT / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB

A75

DRUNKDEER **£130**

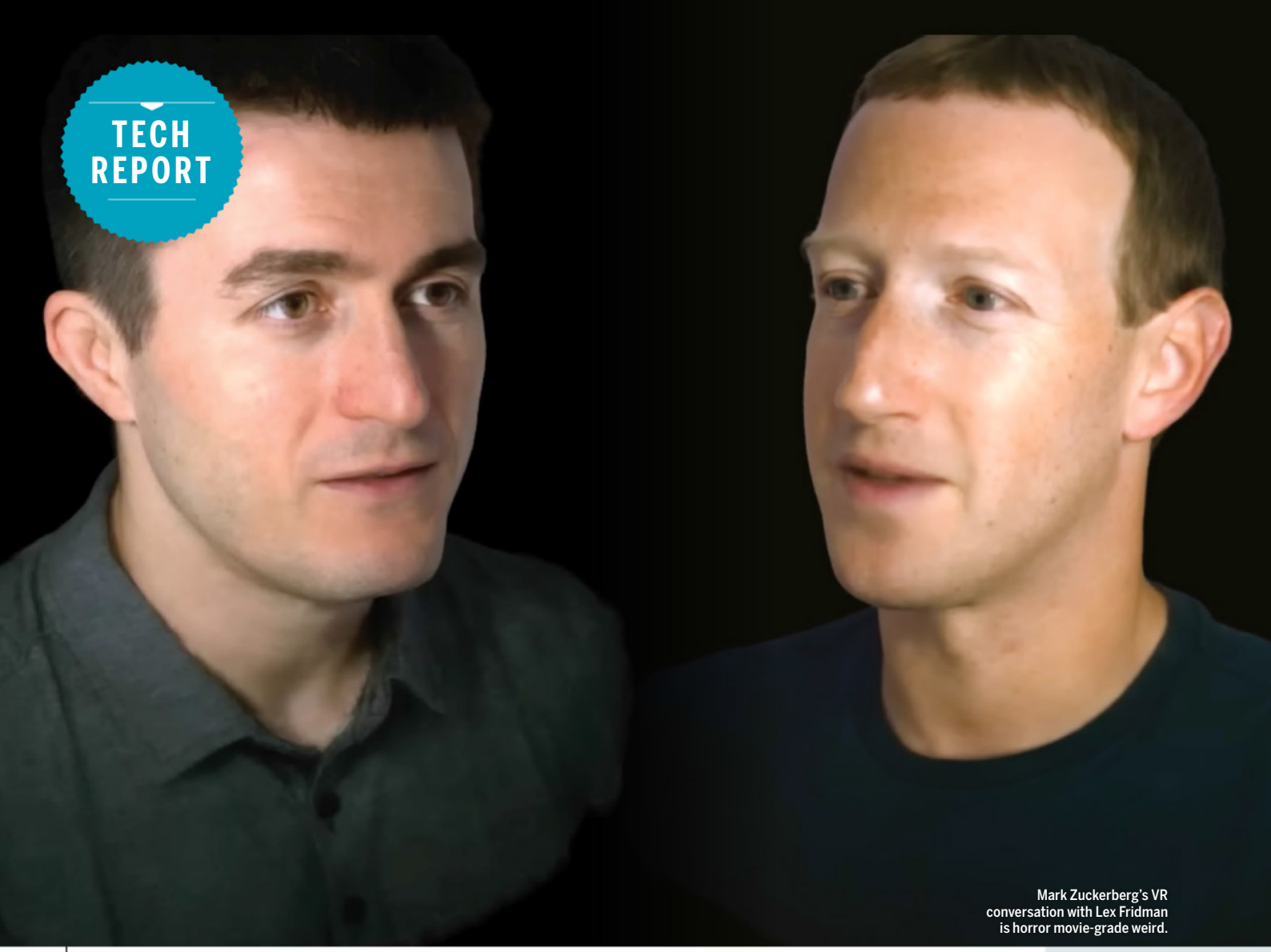
Stumped by software

6 If there's one frustration I have with magnetic and optical gaming keyboards today, it's that they're stupidly expensive. These are seen as premium options for high-rolling gamers and that's a real shame. Hence why I'm inclined to like the DrunkDeer A75. Sure, it's not cheap for a 75% board, but it's a lot cheaper than the rest. A decent-sized keyboard with a lovely multi-function knob and some key magnetic features for the money. You can adjust the actuation between 0.4mm and 3.6mm and there's a feature to enable two actions per-key, which can come in handy on these smaller boards more than with larger ones. But there is a problem with the DrunkDeer, and it's the software. Unlike Wooting's awesome in-browser app, you have to struggle through DrunkDeer's wobbly, confusing software in any attempt to unlock its magnetic tricks. Without a simple way to play around with the keyboard's secondary functions or adjustable actuations, I'm less inclined to use any of it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Smooth switches
- Cheaper than some
- Software is a mess

SPECS SIZE: 75% / **SWITCH:** RAESHA LINEAR MAGNETIC / **ACTUATION:** 0.4–3.6MM / **KEYCAPS:** ABS / **POLLING RATE:** 1,000 HZ / **LIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB



Mark Zuckerberg's VR conversation with Lex Fridman is horror movie-grade weird.

META NARRATIVE

How might gaming level up from Zuckerberg's photorealistic VR CHAT?

Mark Zuckerberg sits across from podcaster Lex Fridman. In a dark space where only their faces and shoulders are visible, the two engage in a stilted, slightly hallucinogenic-feeling conversation, the two gazing in wonder at each other like stoned teenagers. Only, they're not really sharing that space. In reality they're sitting with VR headsets on in different states, using Meta's eponymous Metaverse to show off the company's new photorealistic avatars.

For a gamer, there are two takeaways from Zuckerberg's in-Metaverse appearance on the Lex Fridman podcast. One: you could not possibly find two less expressive human beings on the planet to show off this technology that's all about capturing expressive non-verbal communication. Seriously, Louis Theroux and David Blaine would come across like a couple of kids who've found a can of Monster by comparison. In the world of wrestling, you'd call it a no-sell.

After you've considered the folly of using silicon valley's most famously android-like figure to try to bridge the Uncanny Valley, the next thing that grabs you as a gamer is: can we use this tech to make games better?

What might the impact be on the way we build NPCs, if we can build and animate photorealistic models of ourselves for a glorified Zoom chat? The end of nagging, dead-eyed Preston Garveys following you around? Companions we develop real sentimental attachment to? We can only dream.

How could it affect our avatars in online games, and the way we use emotes? The economies behind live service games are propped up by our vanity, specifically our propensity to drop real money on pretend-clothes and accessories that express who we are in a virtual world. It matters a great deal to us that online strangers take one look at us and react in some way. We want to be seen. What if we could really show who we are, with a photorealistic avatar that animates in real time according to our movements? Goodness. For the sake of all that's holy – *are we all going to have to learn how to floss and do the Carlton dance for real?*

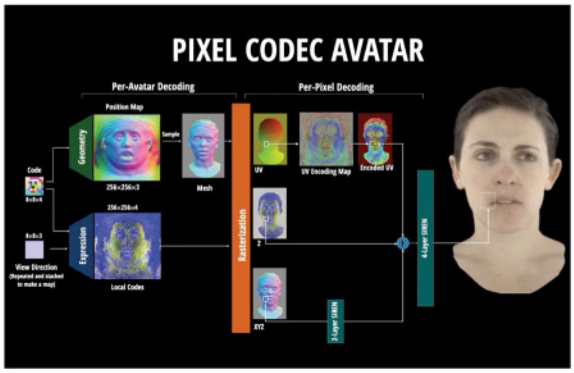
1:1 RECREATION

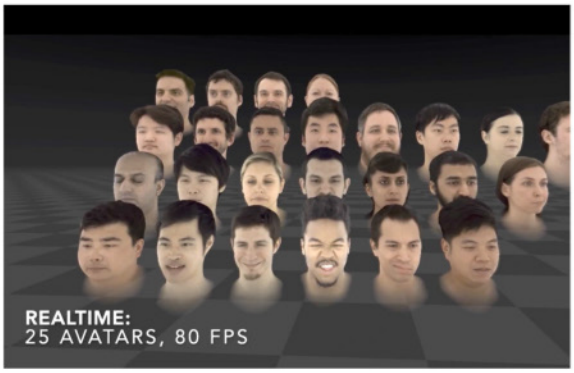
Not everybody wants to put themselves forward as a 1:1 recreation of their physical appearance in-game, of course. Privacy concerns, self esteem issues and simply a desire to push beyond reality into fantastical possibilities will dissuade some of the populace from that. But that still leaves a sizeable enough crowd for the implementation of this tech in games to be profitable, one would assume.

And what if we were further seduced by real, meaningful gameplay evolutions kickstarted by photorealistic in-game depictions? There's something profoundly *LA Noire*-y about

No cap

There's reason to believe Meta's vision for the future is being enacted with considerably less gusto than it once was. Following the 2021 Metaverse reveal and the following financials call, the company witnessed $251 billion of its market cap evaporating in a single day. The artist formerly known as Facebook had been spending very liberally, investors learned, with little in the way of returns. You know, because nobody cares about the metaverse except big tech. Will we see home scanning tech soon, then? Perhaps.





FAR LEFT: Vaudeville shows us how much interesting games are when NPCs are more human.

LEFT: It's the ability to capture facial movements in real time that gives the tech gaming potential.

FACE OFF *Four games that would benefit from a photorealistic, animated you*

AMONG US
Discerning who is sus among jelly beans is gripping. But imagine seeing people's real faces reacting to your questions.

PUBG BATTLEGROUNDS
Would it be enriching to see someone's smirk as they shot you? No. But *PUBG*'s avatars have looked bad for too long.

THE ELDER SCROLLS VI
There's a lot of talking to people in BGS RPGs. Break the monotony by watching your own face accepting the fetch quests.

NBA 2K24
Any sports game, really. They all let you scan your face, and they all produce a horror movie antagonist when you do.

Fridman and Zuckerberg's conversation, and it brings back to mind how seismic Team Bondi's facial capture tech was for 2011. It birthed a humanistic detective procedural genre which has a grand total of one game in its oeuvre, because development of that game was a well-documented living nightmare. If achieving convincing, readable facial expressions is much easier now, that opens the door for more games like the prototypical *LA Noire* where reading social cues is a central mechanic.

Maybe that sounds a bit boring in comparison to knee-sliding around King's Canyon and headshotting noobs in *Apex Legends*, but think of it this way: *Among Us* managed to conquer the games industry in 2020, and it's basically a lie detector test with jelly beans.

SPONTANEOUS

We keep proving that we care just as much about our spontaneous interactions in games just as much as the premise or mechanics, because we keep making games like *Sea of Thieves* and *Phasmophobia* popular. Without co-op companions to riff with, digging for treasure and watching meter readings go up and down would provide precisely zero enjoyment. We love these games because they allow us to express our personalities, whether that's by drinking too much grog and throwing up on our mates' shoes, performing an inappropriate sea shanty, or diligently quarterbacking the ghost hunt because none of the other idiots are going to.

AI-driven detective game *Vaudeville* shows us how smarter NPCs can completely change an experience, and the cast of AI suspects in that case are hardly Mensa material, garbling ChatGPT nonsense at you. But that's how low the bar is right now. How low it's been for decades. NPCs are voice line dispensers that occasionally lollop around awkwardly. Make them more human in any way, and suddenly we're fascinated.

CAN WE USE THIS TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE GAMES BETTER?

SCANNING PROCEDURE

There's a catch. Fridman and Zuckerberg didn't load up Metaverse, press a button and generate photorealistic avatars of themselves. "I went to Pittsburgh and went through the wh ole scanning procedure, which has so much incredible technology," says Fridman to Zuckerberg with all the effervescence of a sedated Jack Dee. "The production of these scans in a really efficient way is one of the last pieces that we still need to really nail," Zuckerberg adds.

It's a glimpse into one possible future, just like Meta's share price-tanking jamboree of legless Miis was in 2021. It's not a set path. If enough of us show an interest, it'll happen, and if we don't, Meta will be back with something else shiny to catch our eye.

But gamers should be interested in the tech industry nailing that last key piece, the efficient production of scanning hardware that lets us create digital facsimiles at consumer level. What a tool it'd be for indie developers, and what a springboard for innovation it might provide for bigger budget studios. At the bare minimum, it could disrupt the cosmetics market in live service games, and that alone is worth the toil of taking an hours-long scanning process and repackaging it into an at-home experience. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

FRAME DROP

Learning to love imperfect framerates again

Let's just take a second to reaffirm the reality we find ourselves in with PC gaming as we approach 2024. We load up a game we quite fancy playing, set the graphics preset to maximum, and then start the game. If the frame counter that we constantly have running reads anything below 60, at any point, we then stop playing the game and decide we must pay somewhere between £1,000-£1,500 on a chunk of circuit boards to make that number go up to 60 again.

And that's not just a bit of self-deprecating humour. That's the behaviour loop that the hardware industry's actually counting on. It's been three years since *Cyberpunk* – how many newer games offer higher fidelity visuals? And how much more performance did you get from CD Projekt's updates in the interim? If you bought a good GPU in the last four years, the game industry hasn't given you a reason to buy a newer one. Nvidia's taken to putting numbers at the end of its DLSS versions to convey a laddering up towards ultimate fidelity, but back in the real world, most games offer about the same fidelity as they did when you last upgraded.

There's actually quite a lot riding on our obsession with framerates, then. And that, of course, means that if we could just dislodge this inherently broken way of thinking, PC gamers could force both the software and hardware sides of the game industry into real positive change. And if you were shaking your head at me calling this a broken way of thinking just now, consider this: while we sit there furious, changing the soft shadows setting and running benchmarks, console players are playing the actual game. At the equivalent of the 'medium' or even 'low' preset. Without a frame counter. And they're having fun. You know that's true, because you've been that person too. Historically I've been guilty in the extreme of this typically PC gaming thinking. Perpetually dissatisfied, unable to let an imperceptible drop in fidelity go. In my first staff job in gaming media, I spent a large part of my day benchmarking components for the late great PC Format magazine. I couldn't very well go back home and play things on 'medium' after that, could I? Not when I'd seen the Heaven 2.5 benchmark whizzing along at 60fps all day.

THERE'S ACTUALLY QUITE A LOT RIDING ON OUR OBSESSION WITH FRAMERATES

FRAME COUNTER

So like a lot of PC players, I had a frame counter running in the corner of my screen as a matter of course. I dabbled with FRAPS at first, before getting hooked on harder stuff like Nvidia's GeForce Experience.

Over a decade later, I still hadn't finished *Cyberpunk* because I couldn't achieve max settings and a solid 60. And even though the hybrid of high and max settings that I dabbled with did produce a reasonably stable 60 on my RTX 2080 TI, and looked basically indiscernible to max across the board, I couldn't enjoy the game like that. I hadn't finished *The Witcher 3* for similar reasons – I installed a host of mods that made it look like marriage material, but it subsequently ran at about 40fps, so I decided it was better to just not play it at all.

It was competitive games that forced me to change my outlook. Hitting a nice locked 60fps in *PUBG* and *Overwatch* was paramount to me, because it meant there was a very small chance I might get more kills at that synced frame and refresh rate. Nice soft shadows could get stuffed. I noticed I was playing these games often, and that I didn't ever miss the slightly more resource-hungry method of rendering pretend shadows.

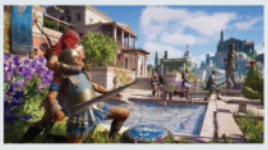
So I turned off the frame counter. For the first time in years, I was flying blind in all my games. The singleplayer ones too: I put systems and mechanics first, and accepted that I wasn't seeing the absolute best possible pixel rendering. And do you know what happened? I finished a load

PHIL IWANIUK
Despite repeated attempts to 'turn off' his car's speedometer, long-time contributor Phil Iwaniuk thankfully hasn't managed it yet. The streets of Somerset are still safe – for now.

DROP OUTS *Four games you never finished, because frame rate*

CRYSIS
"Oh god, that aliens bit at the end was bad wasn't it," you tell people, having only seen that finale on YouTube because you couldn't bear the 15fps reality.

FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2020
Oh cool, look – it's your home town! And there's the pyramids and the Sphinx. Great. Time to uninstall it forever as punishment for making you pilot a Cessna at flip-book speeds.



ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY
The odds were stacked against you due to the game's sheer size, but stealth takedowns at 47fps don't offer much incentive to cover all that ground.

CYBERPUNK 2077
Phantom Liberty's out now, too. And you're not going to finish that either, because the reflections don't look quite right yet. Maybe if you changed one more setting...

of games. Good games, ones I'd had installed in my Steam library for ages, but which I felt had checkmated me by not running perfectly on max settings. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance. Hitman 3. Halo Infinite.* Was it theoretically possible to have been experiencing these titles using rendering techniques that required a higher cost per pixel? It was. Did I care? I did not.

FUSSINESS

The industry preys on our fussiness. It perpetuates the myth that we 'need' to upgrade our rigs every two to four years, when in fact we simply choose to because we're hardware enthusiasts who want the latest shiny things. And game studios are banging their heads against the wall trying to raise the fidelity bar, releasing conceptually stale material because it's so expensive to make games look good now, and the only people who'll bankroll such huge projects want guaranteed returns, or 're-heated tripe' as we better know it. All because we pay such close attention to the number in the corner of our screen. Turn it off, and see what happens. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: In competitive games like *PUBG*, fidelity's nearly irrelevant. We can learn from that.

BELOW: Buying tech like this custom *Starfield* PC is its own joy.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL

£1,048

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Pro RS** ASRock **£112** This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 13400F** Intel **£199** Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 4060** Nvidia **£288** One of the cheaper ways to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **Free** There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		**T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB** Teamgroup **£40** Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		**Pure Power 12 M 550W** Be Quiet! **£91** We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations.
SSD		**WD Black SN770 500GB** Western Digital **£41** It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£38** You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		**Zauron** Aerocool **£32** This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		**Mobiuz EX240** BenQ **£132** You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** G.Skill **£49** It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		**G203** Logitech **£24** A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		**HS55 Stereo** Corsair **£40** Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1,553

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Mortar WiFi** MSI **£177** This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 13400F** Intel **£199** Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		**RX 7700 XT** AMD **£430** If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **Free** Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		**Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200** Corsair **£36** With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		**Pure Power 12 M 650W** Be Quiet! **£107** This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.
SSD		**WD Black SN770 1TB** Western Digital **£63** There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£38** Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		**H7** NZXT **£100** It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		**S2722DGM** Dell **£260** With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** GO.Skill **£49** You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		**DeathAdder V2** Razer **£47** Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		**Blackshark V2** Razer **£85** The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL
£5,393

MOTHERBOARD

MEG X670E Ace
MSI **£715**
There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.

PROCESSOR

Ryzen 9 7950X3D
AMD **£669**
AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 4090
Nvidia **£1,500**
The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.

COOLER

Kraken X63
NZXT **£155**
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.

MEMORY

Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB)
G.Skill **£118**
This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.

POWER SUPPLY

Prime TX-1000
Seasonic **£340**
An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.

BOOT DRIVE

WD Black SN850X 2TB
Western Digital **£110**
You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.

DATA DRIVE

NEW ENTRY

NM790 4TB
Lexar **£189**
With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.

CASE

5000D
Corsair **£140**
We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.

DISPLAY

34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF)
Alienware **£929**
You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.

KEYBOARD

ROG Azoth
Asus **£250**
This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.

MOUSE

G502 Lightspeed
Logitech **£120**
With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET

Arctis 7 Wireless
SteelSeries **£158**
If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVEN[illegible]IN GAM[illegible]NG

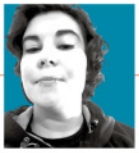
"Playing Baldur's Gate III as a Bad Dragon is not for the faint of heart"

The unseemly thoughts of a BALDUR'S GATE III Dark Urge player

Tackling *Baldur's Gate III* as a dragonborn with the Dark Urge origin sure has been an experience. It's a slightly more messed up angle than I'm used to when it comes to RPGs, but at 100+ hours I figured I probably won't have time to play through the whole thing again. So instead of jumping straight on the morality bandwagon for my first run, I thought I'd go full goblin mode – or dragon mode, to be precise. Enter Bad Dragon.

So I've stepped into the strange and demented world of a forgetful killer, with backstory that gives your character a terrible affinity for all things maleficent. With my most bloodthirsty metal playlist churning in the background, I hurry on to incite whatever horrors I can muster,

KATIE WICKENS



THIS MONTH
Baldur's Gate III has me letting go of attachment.

ALSO PLAYED
Fae Farm

and to piece together my murderous past. Hopefully without making the game too difficult in the process.

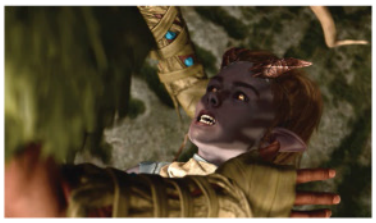
"Killing, now that sounds like your first good idea," the murderous enabler in my head exclaims soon after I begin. That's the first reference to my backstory. This constant narration runs alongside a commentary in my journal that bids me to, "Be yourself! Think dirty thoughts!" It quickly becomes evident that Bad Dragon is above the status of a simple murder hobo when the narrator teases me with visions of a so-called "radiant future", where I might be the one to guide goblin- and tiefling-kind into an endlessly bloodthirsty war. Driving a wedge between the major forces of this world seems to be all too easy.

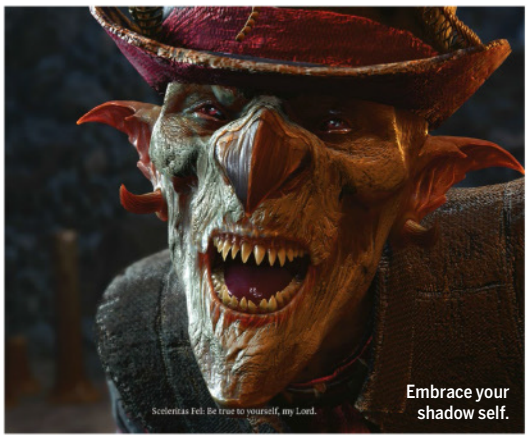
TOP: Don't lose your head, mate.

THRILLS AND KILLS

Bad Dragon is a bloodletter of high calibre, it seems. I'm orchestrating desolation on a mass scale. But with these big ambitions I could use a helping hand, which appears in the form of my own butler, Sceleritas Fel. A peculiar character, he begins sowing seeds of hate and helping me place together my backstory.

I'VE STEPPED INTO THE DEMENTED WORLD OF A FORGETFUL KILLER





Embrace your shadow self.

Aside from the ability to snap the neck of your beloved domme Minthara, rip off Gale's arm before he even leaves the portal you find him in, or crush pixies underfoot, there are some tough decisions to be made later down the line when it comes to the Dark Urge. Are you the kind of person who'll condemn a band of refugees and heroes to death? Or sit by while the character you're romancing is murdered?

Significant questlines can be cut off prematurely if you give into your bloodlust, and friends can quickly transform into foes if they discover that there's an unrepentant serial killer in their midst. It's a hard life, being a wrong 'un. But you'll also get to see a side of *Baldur's Gate III* that other players will never encounter.

Frankly, playing *Baldur's Gate III* as a Bad Dragon is not for the faint of heart. The main takeaway from a playthrough like this is that, while darkly titillating, you're likely to lose the few friends you do have if you're not smart about how you tackle things. If not by your own hands, then through an attitude that makes you altogether highly attackable. It's taught me not to get too attached to any lover, too, as each night spent with them could well be their last. ■

Doesn't he look like an upstanding citizen?

"OMG his head, literally, exploded!"

ROBOCOP: ROGUE CITY is simple, bloody carnage

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Stomped around while ripping limbs off goons.

ALSO PLAYED
Baldur's Gate III, Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty

The leader of the Torch Heads gang, who I can only describe as a reject from an '80s action movie casting call for 'Punk Number 1', has me this close to quitting *RoboCop: Rogue City* before I've even reached the end of the staidly written, slow and clichéd opening cutscene.

The gang leader and his fellow identikit goons have taken over a network TV station and are blathering on about how they've got all the drugs and want to sell all the drugs and nobody is going to stop them bwah ha ha. Apparently they needed to broadcast this message to a new mysterious new player arriving in Rogue City, hence the whole assault on the station.

To show the Torch Heads are serious, its punk-in-chief gives a TV presenter a fatal overdose of drugs, comically named Nuke (sigh), live on air, and then orders his fellow goons to start giving more hostages overdoses. I'm not sure punk-in-chief has thought this through really, though, as surely they want to keep the drugs for, you know, selling to make all the monies. Anyway, I'm a hair trigger away from pulling the plug. But then I, RoboCop, arrive on the scene, the cutscene ends, and the bloody carnage begins. I stomp into the station, my big clanky robofeet announcing my arrival, I raise my Auto 9 machine pistol, point it at 'Punk Number 67' and... OMG his head, literally, exploded!

A REPEAT OFFENDER

And the blood, guts and severed limbs keep coming. This game's gameplay loop sees me walk forwards while shredding goons with a variety of weapons, their spleen, guts and cartilage popping out of them. Occasionally I pick up some evidence, do some puzzling, but it's mostly the head exploding.

RoboCop: Rogue City feels like an early-to-mid 2000s shooter and I've got to be honest, I'm loving it. This game could not be more simple to play and that's the art of its attraction. Well, that and the hyperviolence. The pre-launch version I'm playing is a bit janky, with me running into some animation and physics glitches, but as a complimentary and alternate play experience to 2023's triple-A RPGs, *RoboCop: Rogue City* is working for me right now. ■

"Some say there's satisfaction in working your way up, but balls to that"

Shopping my way to crafting success in FINAL FANTASY XIV

Occasionally, when you're walking around the cities of Eorzea in *FFXIV* you'll spot someone wearing something cool, or see posts online of the insane things people do with housing and wonder where they got it from. Unfortunately the answer is usually they crafted it.

A lot of the game's coolest looking gear and items can only be made if you engage with the crafting side of the game and usually requires getting all eight crafting jobs to level 90 as a lot of the items you make feed into recipes on other jobs. It's an absolutely huge undertaking, but if you want the best stuff you've got to put the work in... or do you?

I'm lazy. I want cool things and prestige with none of the work, which is why I decided to shop my way to handicraft success.

Levelling up your crafters is a simple enough process – you make things and earn a little exp in the process, or you take on orders from NPCs to make higher amounts of exp. But just like levelling up a new fighting class, it takes absolutely ages.

DANIELLA LUCAS

THIS MONTH
Levelled up.

ALSO PLAYED
Sea Of Stars,
TNMT: Shredder's Revenge

First you need to find materials (three gathering classes are involved in this) and turn them into something basic like thread or lumber, then put those things together to make something you actually want like a spear or fancy chair. Some might say there's satisfaction in working your way up, but balls to that – I'm taking a shortcut to the good stuff. I want the Moogle sofas and biker jackets, and I want them now.

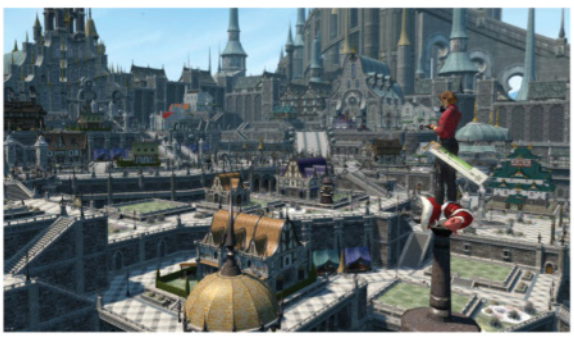
WORK SMARTER

OK, so I could just buy them off the player marketboard outright, but they also cost an absolute fortune. Technically I'm taking the medium cut then – pretending to do the crafting work so I can reach the right levels to make just the things I want, and save some cash too.

I say yes to any job the NPCs can throw at me – you want ten pairs of dragonskin boots? Sure no problem. Three of your finest fish stews? Of course I can make that. But instead of buckling down to do the work I run to the marketboard to find the cheapest option I can and turn that in as my own work while they praise me for being a master at my craft. I'm like a terrible tradie, saying yes to the work but not actually doing it.

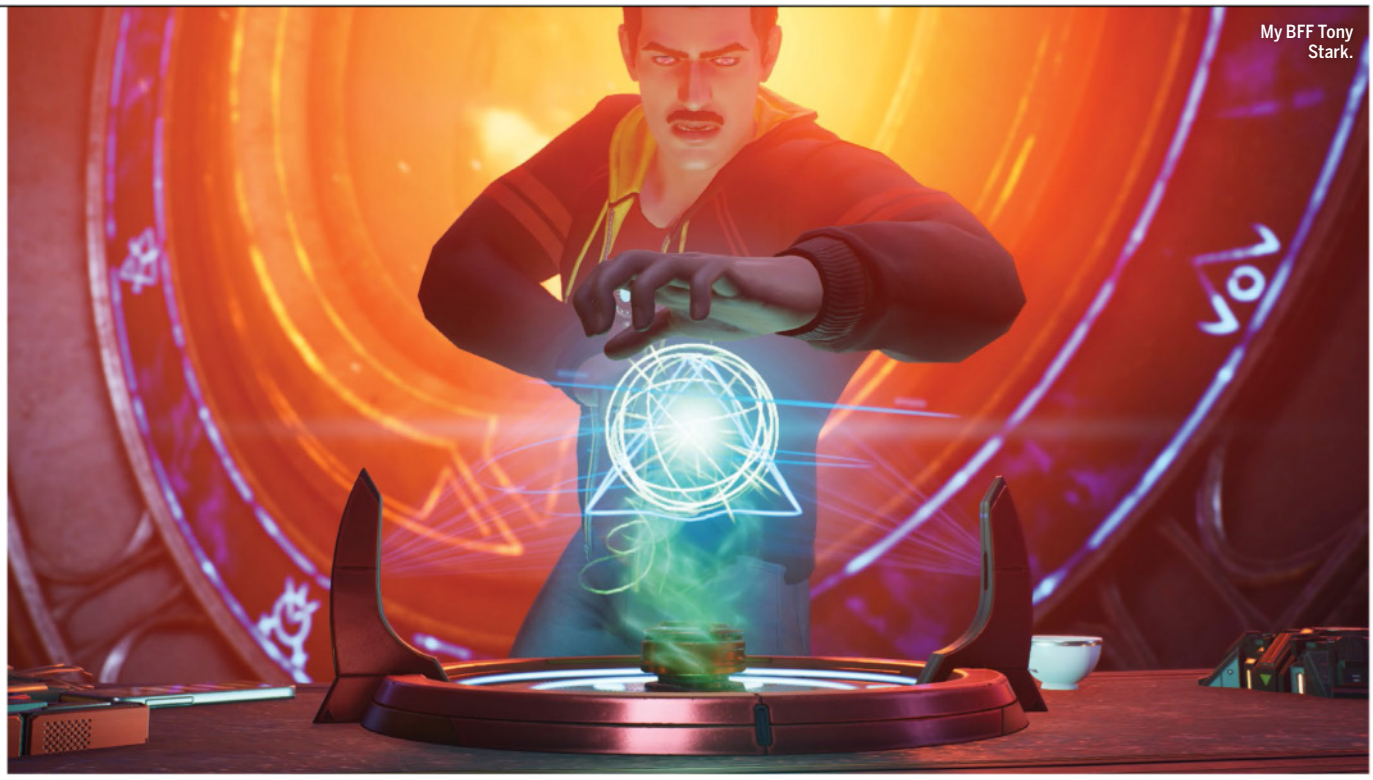
I'M LIKE A TERRIBLE TRADIE, SAYING YES TO THE WORK BUT NOT ACTUALLY DOING IT

Sometimes someone will say they need six vials of medicine urgently as their troops are depending on it! "Sure, I'll get right on that," I say as I let it sit in my quest list for weeks on end. Maybe I should feel guilty, but as my Alchemist dings level 86 and I can finally make the star ornament I wanted for my house I find it hard to care. I've got all of the qualifications I need on paper to make anything Eorzea could possibly need now... perhaps just don't ask me to it. ■



FAR LEFT: I know I said I'd help you build a telescope, but I'm level 90 now and don't need to any more.

BELOW: My crafting technique is all tea breaks and no building.



My BFF Tony Stark.

"Do I want to go fishing? Not really. Tony Stark invited me? OK then!"

Not enough people are talking about MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

I don't really consider myself much of a tactical RPG guy. The closest equivalent I've thrown myself into is the *Mario + Rabbids* series, looked upon as a watered-down family-friendly take on the genre. It's not until *Marvel's Midnight Suns* that I've really understood why people invest countless hours in them.

Developed by Firaxis Games – known for *XCOM* and *Sid Meier's Civilization* – *Marvel's Midnight Suns* snuck into the end of 2022 in an awkward December release spot that I'm sure didn't help it garner the recognition it deserves. As a superhero aficionado I try to play most major games from the worlds of Marvel and DC, and yet I wasn't too fussed about this one. It wasn't until murmurs of its quality started to be heard around the PC Gamer office and parts of the web that I realised I should probably give it a go. I did the same with *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy*, leaving it until a couple of months after launch – which, subsequently ended up being my game of the year.

MATT POSKITT

THIS MONTH
Debated The Art of War with Captain America and Wolverine.

ALSO PLAYED
Starfield, Atlas Fallen

And lo and behold, *Marvel's Midnight Suns* is fantastic. Its writing is smart, its combat is methodically sound and its level of customisation has kept me enthralled from start to end. A good chunk of my time has been spent in the Abbey, the ancestral home of the Hunter (the game's custom protagonist) and a temporary base for the Midnight Suns. It has everything: common room, library, war room, chapel and barracks, with every character getting their own quarters. Then you're free to roam the gloomy grounds that gradually expand over the course of the game.

ITS COMBAT IS SOUND AND ITS LEVEL OF CUSTOMISATION HAS KEPT ME ENTHRALLED

SOAP OPERA

What particularly hooked me in are the relationship dynamics. Did I think I would care about Blade's crush on Captain Marvel? No, yet here I am playing Cupid. Do I want to go fishing? Not really. Tony Stark invited me? OK then! I'm now part of a book club with Captain America and Wolverine where we discuss The Art of War by Sun Tzu. It sounds daft. It is daft. But it works!

It's the little things that go a long way for me. A small addition that I absolutely love is the superhero walk. Every time you load up a mission, your team of three suits up and heads to a portal in blockbuster fashion, ready to be transported to where they're needed. We've seen it a million times in movies. We've seen it quite a few times in videogames over the last decade or so. None has managed to create that feeling so vividly as *Marvel's Midnight Suns*. ■

FINAL FANTASY XIV

Worlds collide as Endwalker draws to a close. *By Mollie Taylor*

I have returned to the land of Eorzea, bleary-eyed and exhausted from having missed the last two *Final Fantasy XIV* patches. Perhaps the sleep deprivation has finally caused me to go mad, because I don't remember this game ever being populated by tiny pink bean people and a gaudy platforming battle royale that makes me deeply angry despite its cutesy exterior attempting to placate me.

What's that? It's because there's a *Fall Guys* collaboration that's been added in Patch 6.51? I would question it, but in a world where we've also received crossovers with *Monster Hunter*, *Yokai Watch* and even freakin' Fender guitars, it'd be wise of me to be a little more open-minded.

I suppose with *Final Fantasy XIV*'s latest expansion, *Endwalker*, nearing two years of age and drawing to a close to usher in next summer's *Dawntrail*, now is as good a time as any to start chucking in the weirder non-story stuff that'll keep people entertained. After all, it's certainly working on me.

Something I've always really admired about this MMO is that it doesn't slack when it comes to the crossover events. It's almost always a two-way street, with both parties receiving some goodies from the other. Plus, in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s case, their end of the deal often goes far beyond the odd cosmetic or two.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE August 24, 2013	**DEVELOPER** Square Enix
PUBLISHER Square Enix	**LINK** finalfantasyxiv.com

For the *Fall Guys* collaboration, that means somehow building the entire premise of that game within *Final Fantasy XIV*'s limitations. Sprawling levels with swinging hammers, spinning platforms and dangers that rain down from the sky and roll down hills make up the meat of each level here, with players jumping and running from point A to point B.

DUNGEON MECHANICS

The game cleverly makes use of some of its dungeon mechanics – like forced march, where you're given a particular direction to be uncontrollably sent off toward, or one that makes you spin with a sluggish command over your character à la Alzadaal's Legacy's final boss. There are three levels in total per run, with a pretty limited pool of minigames it plucks from, following the standard elimination format *Fall Guys* runs.

It culminates in an experience that multiplies the jank of both games tenfold, but somehow remains brimming with charm. It certainly helps that there are cosmetics to be earned for playing: adorable *Fall Guys* loungewear, crown hats, an emote and a mount are all up for grabs in exchange for event currency.

BLUNDERFUL

If the idea of losing hours of your life to a janky jumping puzzle is somehow unappealing, Patch 6.51 did also add some actual *Final Fantasy XIV* stuff, too. Variant dungeon Aloalo Island was added, along with its criterion version Another Aloalo Island. They're another breed of the special dungeons Square Enix has been pushing this expansion, with the variant dungeon offering scaled difficulty and branching paths while the criterion dungeon is a far tougher, fixed experience.

CLEVERLY MAKES USE OF ITS DUNGEON MECHANICS

Crafters and gatherers can continue their Splendorous Tools relic grind, with Patch 6.51 introducing the Brilliant step, knocking the item level up to 630 and providing some juicy stat increases. If using your hands to beat the crud out of other players rather than creating things is more appealing, then a brand-new Crystalline Conflict PvP map has also been introduced. The Red Sands is a dangerous desert, with sand monsters erupting from below while an oasis provides respite.

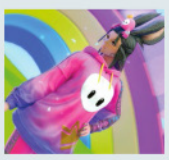
The *Fall Guys* stuff is definitely the shining star though, and worth prioritising since it'll disappear for the unforeseeable future on December 31. Everything else can be completed at your own pace, no scary big timer looming over your head.

The patch is a little dry, sure, especially when you take the collaboration out. It's standard as we're this far into the expansion cycle though, and particularly since *Endwalker*'s being stretched out a tad beyond the usual two-year pattern to try and get Square Enix back on track with its pre-pandemic summer release schedule.

It's wild to think that Patch 6.51 will be one of the very last before *Dawntrail*, too: Patch 6.55 is set to release in mid-January 2024, and there's a good chance we'll see a Patch 6.58 to round things off in the early summer before 7.0 hits. ■

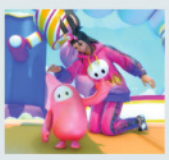
FALLING WITH STYLE

Fall Guys *goodies abound this patch*

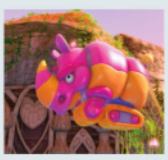


THREADS
Designer fashion line for the cosiest of all the Beans.

EMOTE
Rub your victory in your friends' face with this emote.



MINI-BEAN
What's better than one big Bean? A mini-Bean!



MOUNT
Take *Fall Guys* on the go with an egregious inflatable mount.

ABOVE: Blunderville is full of Beany photo opportunities.

FAR LEFT: Minigames have you participating in jumping puzzles and objective-based events.

I feel like Eorzea is a little too calm about the giant Bean invasion.

Give yourself the stealth options CDPR denied you.

CYBERPUNK 2077 2.0

The best mods for the freshly updated RPG. *By Christopher Livingston*

Well, it took a few years, but CD Projekt finally finished the game it said was finished back in December of 2020. Now that the RPG's unlabelled Early Access period is complete, it's a great time to dive back into the gritty, moody, neon-soaked world of body mods and questionable slang. Even if you're not playing the *Phantom Liberty* expansion, *Cyberpunk 2077 2.0*, which arrived in September, is filled with improvements, upgrades, new features and almost an entire overhaul of the perk system.

But no matter how much a developer improves a game, modders are always happy to jump in and improve it some more. The updated and overhauled *2.0* version of *Cyberpunk 2077* is no exception, so here's a few preem mods you should install right away, choomba. If you're the stealthy sort of V who prefers slithering through levels and taking down gang members without being seen, you'll definitely want the *Stealth Finishers* mod by Kvalyr. Stealth in *Cyberpunk 2077* is pretty satisfying and there are a good number of perks dedicated to it, but as you begin silently dropping enemies you'll quickly notice there's something amiss. The only two animations for stealth takedowns are choking someone out or snapping their necks.

Wait, what? Why limit you to a couple of measly repetitive finishers when you're positively bristling with

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sept 21, 2023

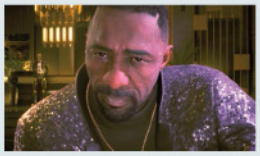
DEVELOPER
CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER
CD Projekt Red

LINK
cyberpunk.net

FUTURE PUNK

What we want from a sequel



MORE IDRIS ELBA
The only guy cooler than Keanu Reeves steals the show in *Phantom Liberty*. We want more.

OUR OWN GANG
Instead of dealing with gangs, let us recruit street punks, pick a theme and manage a crew.

A NEW CITY
It would be great to see the future in a different part of the world instead of returning to Night City.

A PREQUEL?
It would be cool to meet and hang with younger versions of our best pals.

FAR LEFT: Even more than the vanilla game, mods let you be who you wanna be.

ABOVE: Sure, version 2.0 added lots of cool stuff. But mods add even more.

cool weapons like knives and katanas, arm-mounted blades and even monowire, which would be ideal for choking people out? Thankfully the mod makes more options available to you, adding melee weapon stealth finishers so you can knife-stab fools right in the neck and jab them into red slush with multiple pokes from your mantis blades. And if you do want to do a clean and quick non-lethal choke-out, the mod still allows you to grapple foes.

Naturally, ramming your arm-swords into someone's head and chest a few times makes a bit more noise than just breaking their neck, and that may alert other foes nearby – not exactly what you want when you're rolling with a stealth build. Point is, the mod gives you extra options for your stealth run so you don't get tired of the same two animations right away.

HARDWARE UPGRADE

Speaking of options, the discerning street rat always wants as many as possible. And there's an extremely tough choice to make as you're playing *Cyberpunk 2077*: which brain implant will you install? Sure, you can fit multiple pieces of cyberware into some parts of your body, but that big meaty CPU you call a brain only has a single slot for an operating system. That means you have to choose between the blade weapon bullet-time ability you get with the Sandevistan, one of the most fun and useful abilities in the game, the Cyberdeck's quick hacking ability that lets you infiltrate enemy networks and anyone connected to them, and the Berserk OS which pumps up your health and ranged weapon damage.

In a future with so many wonderful options, it feels unfair to have to stick with just one, so the *Cyberware-Ex* mod by psiberx adds expansions in your head so you can slot all three, if you like. Now you can be a time-altering slicer-dicer, a rampaging juggernaut, and a slick hacker all at the same time. It definitely feels a bit like cheating, but there's nothing wrong with wanting access to all the cool toys at once. The mod also allows for multiple slots in your eyes, arms and legs, so you'll truly get to install and use any gadget combinations you desire.

Since we're on the topic of filling your body with circuit boards and microchips, it can be a bit of a hassle to visit a ripperdoc every single you want to manage your various pieces of cyberware. It makes sense in terms of immersion – if I need a tooth pulled or replaced, I'm gonna go to the dentist, not get a mirror and a pair of pliers – but this is the distant future. Surely upgrading my body could be handled with a little DIY? The original *Ripperdeck* mod has been upgraded for *2.0*, meaning you can manage your cyberware needs right from the main menu.

R.E.S.P.E.C

CDPR was nice enough to grant a big player request in *2.0*, giving both new and returning characters a big do-over button. You can respec not just your skills but also your attributes, which gives you a chance

THE INFINITE ATTRIBUTE RESET MOD COULD BE A LIFESAVER

to completely rebuild your character from the ground up. Thing is, you can only do it once per character. That's a bit of a mixed blessing since you may wind up placing a few points in the wrong spot or being even less happy with your character than you already were.

If that's the case, the *Infinite Attribute Reset* mod by FarisFaux could be a lifesaver for you. If you want to respec your V a second time, change your point distribution a little, or just enjoy the freedom to rebuild your character whenever you please, the mod adds an ever-present 'Reset Attributes' button to the main menu. Push it and let the rebuilding begin.

CAR DEALER

For even more convenience, let's talk about vehicles. Want to shop for cars from the comfort of your own home? Want to even shop for cars added by other mods? The *Virtual Car Dealer* mod by djkovrik will give you that chance. Using V's in-game computer from any one of the apartments, you can browse and buy new vehicles added by other modders. It's the future, after all. Why limit your choice of rides? ■

GET STARTED IN

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

Triumph over Adyr with these tough tips. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

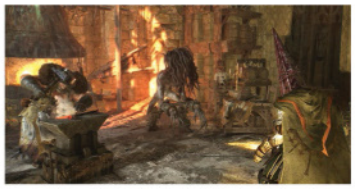
Best early weapons:
shorturl.at/izEJV

Best startng class:
shorturl.at/puzGS

Get boss weapons:
shorturl.at/rxEO1

TOP CLASS

1 There are nine classes in *Lords of the Fallen*, not including the four secret ones you unlock in-game. The Hallowed Knight is a great option for your first run if you want a resilient all-rounder, though the Orian Preacher is also strong if you want to mess around with magic.



WEAPONS OF WAR

2 With over 150 to find, it isn't long before your inventory is packed out with viable weapons. The most important part of picking one is making sure it has a versatile moveset that you enjoy, plus that it scales well – C or higher – with the primary stat you're looking to level.

VITAL STATS

3 Health is vital in *Lords of the Fallen*, mainly because enemy damage massively escalates towards the endgame, perhaps more so than any other *Souls*-like out there. You might have managed with low health in *Elden Ring*, but that's not going to cut it here.

WITHER

4 This Umbral mechanic is a little reminiscent of *Bloodborne*, but *Lords of the Fallen* adds its own twist. If you parry an attack or get hit while blocking, a portion of your health bar will Wither and turn grey, but you can restore this health by attacking.

SPELLS TROUBLE

5 Magic is really good in *Lords of the Fallen*. Not only does it give you a little extra ranged damage while exploring, but it offers an extra source of healing besides your Sanguinax, and an easy way to remove status ailments.

SOWING SEEDS

6 Resting at Vestiges gives you a checkpoint, but these corpse-shrines are few and far between. Instead, you'll get Vestige Seeds from bosses that you can plant in Umbral flowerbeds to create a temporary rest spot.

GUIDING LIGHT

7 Your Umbral Lamp is an important tool for exploration. If you hit a dead-end with no way through, chances are raising it will find a way around. Though filled with secrets, the Umbral is dangerous, and enemies can pull you through into that realm.

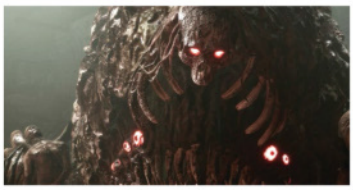
LETHAL LORDS *Defeat Mournstead's deadliest denizens*

SANGUINATE OFTEN

8 Healing is pretty sparse in *Lords of the Fallen*. Your Sanguinax item has a limited number of charges, so you'll want to find Saintly Quintessences to upgrade it where possible. You'll find these in the Umbral, inside corpses with little golden halos above their head.

BOSS WEAPONS

9 While exploring Pilgrim's Perch, you'll want to make sure you pick up the Bowl of Revelations in the Umbral. Just past the Vestige of Blind Agatha, you'll find it inside a corpse. Take it back to Molhu at Skyrest Bridge and you'll be able to buy boss weapons and armour.



FARM THE UMBRAL

10 If you're looking for more souls *cough cough* I mean Vigor to level your stats, the best way to get it is by farming the Umbral due to its unlimited enemy spawns. A great early game farm spot is the Vestige of Chabui near the entrance to Pilgrim's Perch.

QUEST EASY

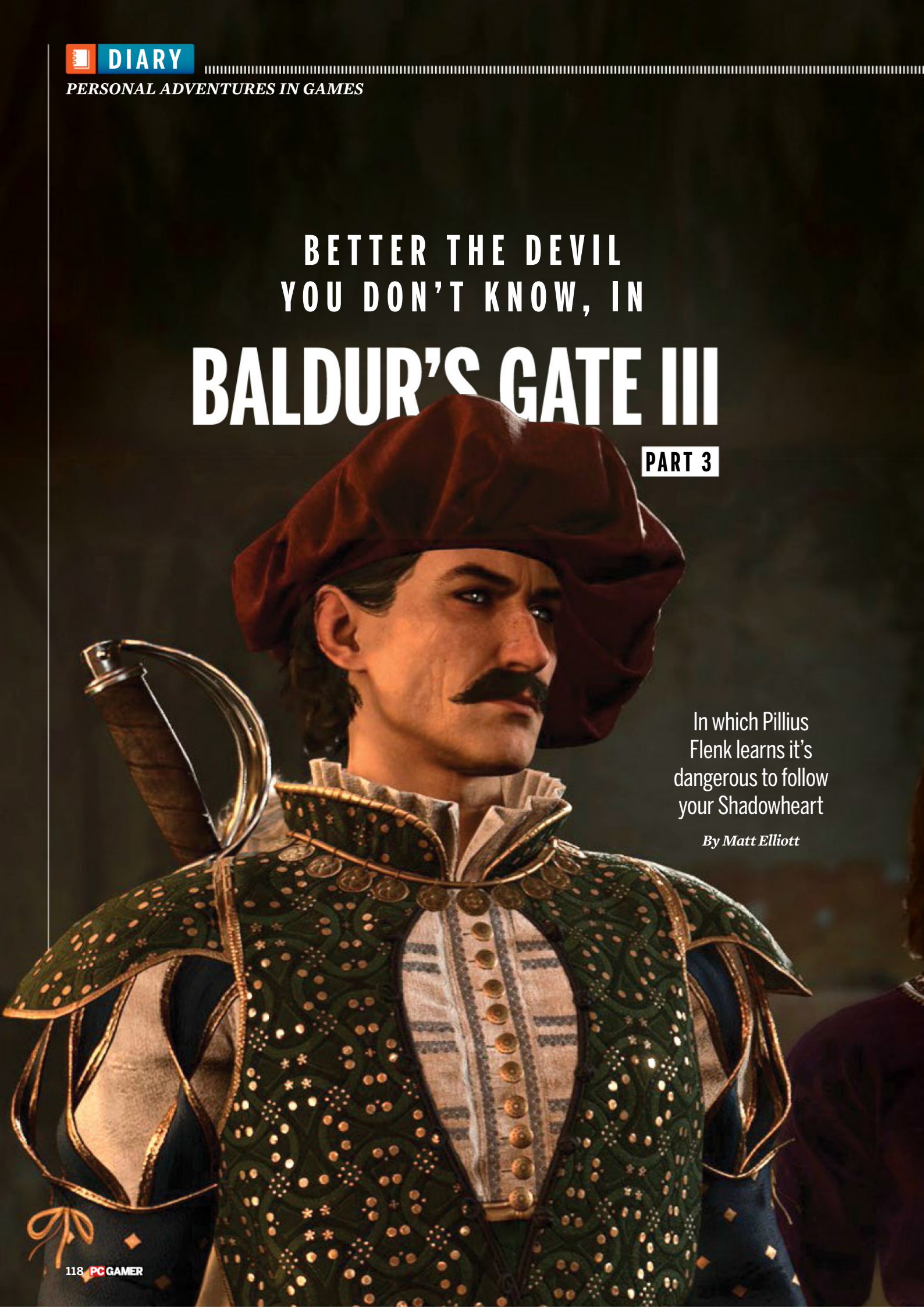
11 Mournstead is flush with mysterious items related to one quest or another. The easiest way to parse these is by talking to the NPCs at Skyrest Bridge. If you have a quest item related to that character, a little moth symbol appears next to the talk icon.

STAY FROSTY

12 *Lords of the Fallen* loves the whole 'enemy hiding around corner' cliché. Honestly, it loves it so much that you'll struggle to find a corner, barrier, or ledge where there isn't a dog or zombified enemy waiting to shove you into oblivion.

BETTER THE DEVIL YOU DON'T KNOW, IN BALDUR'S GATE III

PART 3



In which Pillius Flenk learns it's dangerous to follow your Shadowheart

By Matt Elliott

Flenk stands on the field of victory. Lying beside his luxury owlbear fur-lined moccasins are the corpses of his enemies: the fearsome goblin leaders whom he was tasked with destroying to save the druid, Halsin. Well, I say bodies. But in truth there's only one. The other two are as yet undiscovered. One, Minthara, fell to her death when Flenk heroically collapsed the bridge she was standing on. The other, Dror, was blasted to oblivion when he failed to notice Flenk surrounding his throne with explosive barrels, also heroically. If that sounds cowardly – and it probably does – rest assured that our hero heroically killed Priestess Gut with his bare hands (actually with a rapier, in a four-on-one mugging inside a locked room). However you spin it, though, the job is done and Flenk intends to devour every morsel of praise from the refugees whose lives his actions have saved. Songs will be sung. Stories will be written. Exaggerations will be made.

GLAIVE DANGER

Flenk returns, triumphantly, to the liberated druid camp. It's wonderful because every snippet of overheard dialogue is praising our vital work. Flenk has never before felt such an overwhelming desire to speak to every single shuffling nobody. Adoration is his ambrosia. There's also a delicious moment during which Halsin tells off Kagha, the rogue druid who previously tried to enact the Rite of the Thorns, while Pillius lurks behind the hulking druid, sniggering like the head boy watching a ruffian get a dressing down. "Someone's in trouble!" The only downside is that I don't get to have a full conversation with Kagha and rub my timely intervention in her beautiful face. The sting of this is somewhat lessened by the news that Team Flenk is getting a reward for their hard work. Some mild puzzling later, and Flenk unlocks a subterranean vault full of delicious riches, including a glaive that's probably cursed and a robe that he'll almost certainly feed to Gale. Oh well. Pillius Flenk doesn't act heroically for monetary gain; he does it because praise is his lifeblood and he'll turn to dust without constant adoration.

THE RULES

1. You need to be adored. Say yes to everything.
2. Do everything possible to avoid actual physical confrontation.
3. Thrill your party by performing a song during every fight.

There's a party back at camp to celebrate Flenk's victory. I realise I'm talking about this like I've finished the game, when, in fact, this is only the first act. But all the signs point to Pillius' adventuring career being short and feeble, so he's making the most of it. Everyone he speaks to is celebrating his victory. There are even bards writing songs of his exploits. These won't be as good as a song Flenk would write about himself, obviously, but it's still praise that he slurps up like a dog with a dropped pudding. It's also a chance to catch up with his treasured teammates. There's a moment with Asterion in which they discuss which of their fellow adventures they'd like

THEY SHARE STORIES AND SIP WINE, WITH SHADOWHEART REVEALING HER HISTORY

to drink – we've all done it! – and finally we come to Shadowheart. There's been some tepid flirting up until now, but the flowing wine and glow of self worth are leading them down a hornier path. Flenk and Shadowheart agree to meet later... and it's actually rather sweet. They share stories and sip wine, with Shadowheart revealing something of her forgotten history. She reveals her troubled past as a Shar worshipper, and her ultimate goal of becoming a Dark Justiciar. In a grim mirror of real life, it's around now that Flenk should be considering stepping away, but it's tricky; Shadowheart seems sad and looks nice, a dangerously alluring cocktail for a man with Flenk's questionable motivations. They talk, drink, and laugh, then fall asleep overlooking a waterfall. In the morning they wake and share a kiss, and even a frothing libertine such as Pillius Flenk can't deny that he's made a real, human connection. A rare moment of sincerity from a man for whom lying comes as easily as playing the lyre while other people fight monsters.

JUSTICIAR DESERTS

It's a confusing moment for Pillius, but a welcome one. Buoyed with the morning afterglow, Flenk discuss his next steps with Halsin. The group are to venture to Moonrise Towers, a fortified building in which the followers of the Absolute have taken refuge. Nothing about this sounds especially tempting to Flenk, much less so because there's talk of cursed lands and imminent danger. Worse still, there's very little glory in it. As far as he can tell, infiltrating the Absolute stronghold won't lead to any tangible benefits, aside from not being killed by a parasitic mind worm, which, at the moment, is a tomorrow problem. He's about to leave the conversation and find something more dashing to do when talk turns to the route we'll take. One option is to travel overground, through Shadow-Cursed Lands, which makes the prospect even less enticing. The alternate route will take

Come on, game. It's obviously three, isn't it? The horniest choice.

us through the Underdark, of which Flenk knows very little, but the name alone is off-putting. Grimdeep. Miseryhollow. Netherglade. But just when Pillius is about to hang up his lyre, Halsin mentions a sect of Shar-worshipping Dark Justiciars who are holed up down there. If anything, this makes it an even more wretched proposition, but Pillius recognises the longing look in Shadowheart's limpid pools. She wants to be with her people, even if that means probably killing them. And with that, we choose our path. Not the safest or fastest or sanest route. But the one that strengthens Flenk's burgeoning relationship with a sinister-but-attractive stranger. Some would call it chivalry. Others, stupidity.

Off we set on the next part of our adventure. There are still areas of the map we haven't explored, so the Pillius Massive make a point of exploring these before they journey to the Bothercavern. It's around now that we realise we haven't seen Lae'zel since the crash. Somehow, we've managed to avoid bumping into the second party member that it's possible to recruit. This isn't a huge issue for Flenk, since a) she seemed a bit intense and b) she didn't vibe with Shadowheart, so it feels like he's made his choice. The only evidence she was ever here is a smashed cage and some dead bodies. We even try to commune with the dead to learn what happened, but the bodies refuse to reveal anything. Flenk is mildly disappointed. It's an opportunity lost. If rescuing women from cages is wrong, he doesn't want to be right. Flenk and the gang also discover a dog loitering around a dead body. He uses his skill of animal mastery – essentially holding out his hand and saying "good boy!" – to win the animal over to his cause. There's no material benefit from this apart from having a dog in our camp. Somewhat obviously, Flenk is a dog person and not a cat person. He requires a pet that gives unconditional love and has an appendage specifically designed for demonstrating affection. His entourage of adoring fans grows; although it is rather a shame that someone had to die just so we could have a team mascot.

TADPOLES APART

There are other distractions elsewhere, almost like Flenk is slightly reluctant to commit to Shadowheart and take the dark path to the Umbrachasm. We find a crack in a rock which Flenk is able to squeeze through by using his disguise skill to transform himself into a gnome. It doesn't make any sense, narratively or physically, but the sense of circumventing a problem is delicious. Less delicious, however, is the rabid owlbear that resides within. In a normal game I'd consider fighting the creature to unlock whatever rewards lie nearby. But Pillius Flenk would never bother an owlbear without a humanoid shield and a heroic incentive. He flees immediately, and vows never to explore frightening caves without sending Gale in first.

His decision is justified when he discovers an injured True Soul and some acolytes of the Absolute gathered nearby. He uses his Ithilid powers to avoid a fight, and learns that the injured party was mortally wounded by the owlbear. Better still, there's an opportunity to borrow the dying person's brain worm and use it to buff his own abilities. There's a moment when he dilly-dallies, like a nervous teenager being offered their first joint, then he goes for it. The fresh parasite wriggles into his brain and unlocks new powers. None of them, sadly, are specifically useful for a bard whose primary purpose is avoiding conflict, but he does find a skill that pushes people away from him. That will have to do. The team reaction to this is mixed, to say the least. Asterion is all for it, which isn't a huge surprise: consuming parasites to gain power is a small step away from drinking human blood. And, in fact, the cheeky beggar asks me to share the next one we find. I can't help but admire his chutzpah. Shadowheart, meanwhile, is somewhat unimpressed. It seems very early in their relationship for Flenk to have to explain away his terrible behaviour, but, in Shadowheart's defence, he has just pushed a wriggling parasite into his own brain. His persuasion skills win

DATING PROFILE

Snap him up

Name: Pillius Mortimar Trimble Von Flenk

Age: Vintage

Height/build: Long and fleshy, like an aged flank

Occupation: Greatest bard in Baldur's Gate

Likes: Praise, adoration, the smell of his own musk

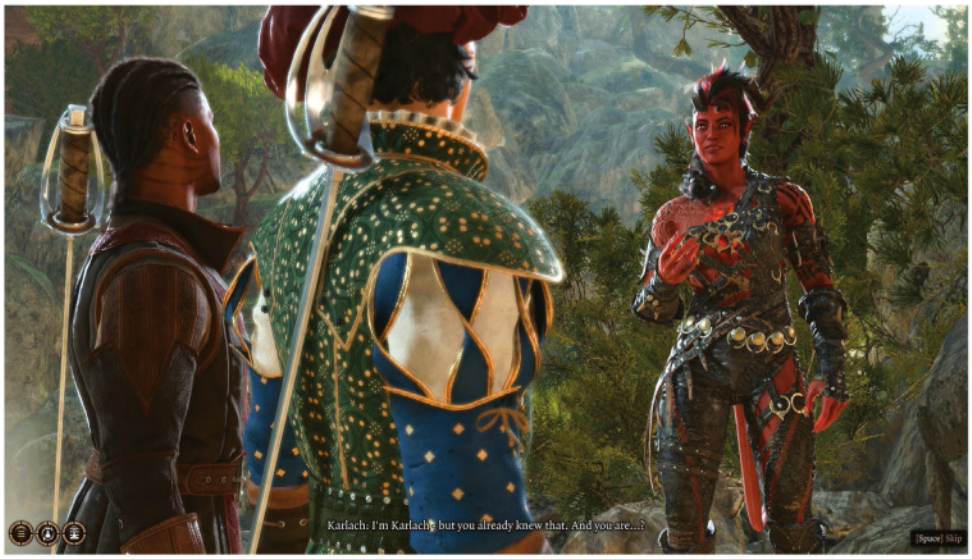
Dislikes: Physical danger, other bards

Hobbies: Living a life of elegance and dash

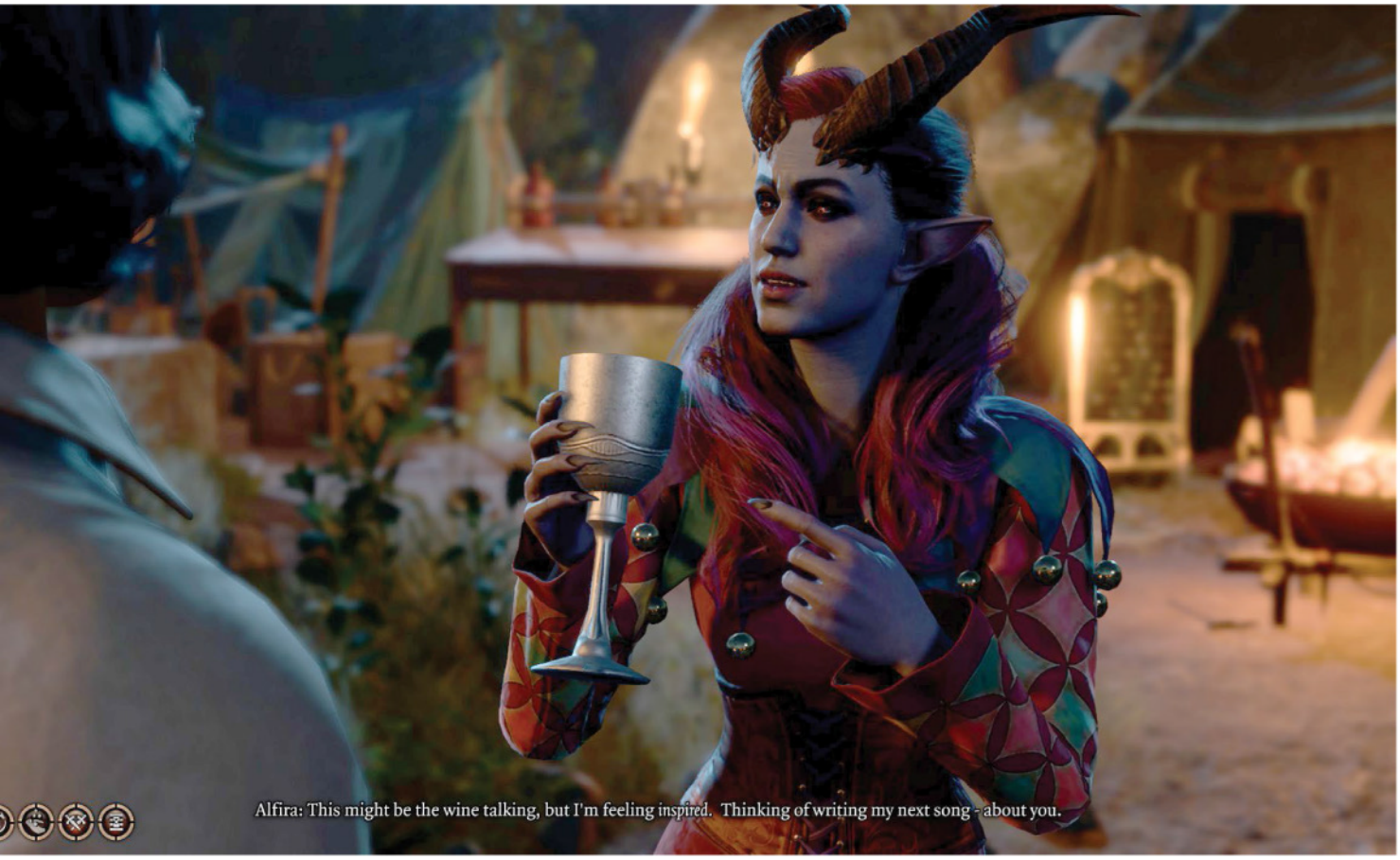
Five words to describe myself: Literally the best man alive

How other people would describe me: Literally the best man alive

What I am looking for in a partner: Troubled goth girl with cool scars. Or a demonic dommy mommy



BELOW: And I am... slightly in love. Which, given the timing, is a problem.



ABOVE: It's not the wine talking. You're inspired because of the Flenkmeister.

WE HEAD TO THE UNDERPLACE TO FACE UNKNOWN PERILS AND PROBABLY DEATH

the day, and a crisis is averted; albeit at the cost of feeling slightly guilty about manipulating a would-be paramour.

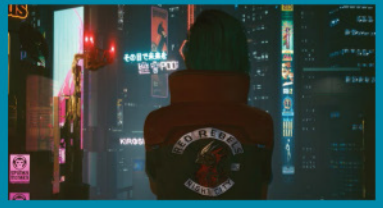
HELLY HANDSOME

So we're all set, then. We'll head to the Underplace to face unknown perils and probably death, just because Pillius is keen to impress a beautiful sad lady he shared a bottle of wine with. The rest of the squad might not know the real reason, but, deep down, Flenk knows his horniness might doom them all. Except that while on the way to the Belowscape, Team Pillius takes a small detour. On the north of our map is a marker showing the location of Karlach, the murderous devil that Wyll mentioned when we first met. Flenk doesn't remember much, because he finds Wyll tedious and hasn't spoken to him since he came to camp. But all the same, he can't resist the opportunity to explore the marker, just in case it's an opportunity to impress a relative stranger. He subs Wyll into his team and we cross the river to explore. We find Karlach and prepare for a fight, but there's a problem.

Firstly, it seems crushingly obvious that she didn't commit the crimes that Wyll is accusing her of. She too has a brainworm, and our shared consciousness all but proves she's an innocent party. Second, she's breathtakingly handsome. Six feet of smouldering muscle and sass. Flenk can already feel her inexorable pull. She says things like "hello handsome!" whenever I initiate a conversation with her, like your best friend's saucy aunt. This comes literally moments after Flenk committed himself to Shadowheart, leading to an important moral lesson: when venturing with a fellowship of hot, troubled fantasy heroes, never make any commitments until you've assembled your entire party. And never agree to explore anywhere dangerous for the sake of love; a lesson Pillius Flenk has learned the hard way. ■

CYBERPUNK 2077 2.0'S PHOTO MODE

Admiring the dystopian future through a camera lens. *By Tyler Colp*



LEFT: *Phantom Liberty*'s Dogtown is full of people perfect for practising screenshots with.

I'm ten hours into *Cyberpunk 2077*'s *Phantom Liberty* DLC and Idris Elba is mad at me. All I want to do is find the right angle so my V looks as cool as possible and he thinks I need to "quit wasting time" and save the president of the New United States.

I'm sorry Mr Elba, sometimes you see something so visually striking that you have to capture it. The president can wait. I've got screenshots to take and as much time as I want to fiddle around with *Cyberpunk*'s *2.0* update and all its new graphical upgrades.

I've got a PC that can handle a lot of modern games, but *Cyberpunk* still destroys my framerate if I turn on its new path tracing mode. But that's OK, there's an option to only have it on while you're in the photo mode. And wow, does it look stunning. Characters get soft reflections from the ambient light on their clothes and everything looks a little brighter. Path tracing especially stands out at night when *Cyberpunk*'s neon signage blankets the streets. It's so beautiful that I keep interrupting missions to see what kind of shots I can take.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

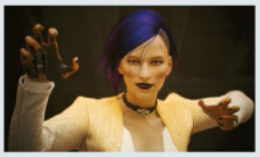
Cyberpunk's photo mode is wonky to use at first. You have control over the floating camera but it's anchored to an orbit around V, making it a pain to fit NPCs into a shot. I've had to walk right up into their faces and enter photo mode so I don't get leashed backward. I could use a mod to break the camera free, but I like the challenge.

NEED TO KNOW

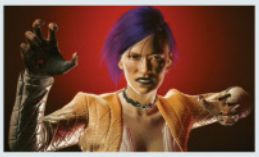
RELEASE September 21, 2023	**DEVELOPER** CD Projekt RED
PUBLISHER CD Projekt RED	**LINK** bit.ly/3FnhArZ

CRACK SHOT

How far can we push the photo mode?



BRIGHTNESS UP
This is the basic shot with the brightness turned up. There's some potential!



BACKGROUND AND FACE
Slap a background on there, try a different facial expression. We're getting somewhere.

FRAMES AND EFFECTS
Frames always make things look a little more dramatic, but we can surely push this even further.

CONTRAST
Crank up the contrast until the background disappears and dunk it in red. I love it.

Like a lot of photo modes, *Cyberpunk*'s doesn't have an option to create sources of light. It does have an option to pose V as if she's shooting her gun though. And you know what guns do? They make muzzle flashes that work great for brightening up a scene. You can select a pose and then twist V around until she's just out of frame. It works brilliantly despite how stupid it looks.

I'D LOVE TO FIND SOME MOODY SPOTS IN THE CITY TO SHOOT

From there, you can do basic things like tilt the camera or pull the FOV in to bring the foreground closer to your subject. I've only taken close-ups of characters so far, but I'd love to find some moody spots in the city to shoot, too. NPCs are fun because you can freeze them mid-animation. I found a lady sitting at a table in the middle of a market peering down at her phone. The glow on her face reminded me of standing in a crowd at a busy bus stop in the winter, and I wanted to emulate that as much as I could.

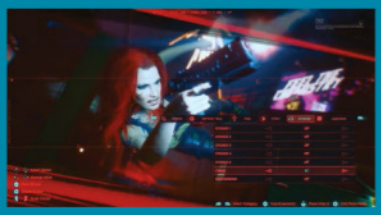
Photo mode lets you play with the brightness and highlights to isolate that glow with all the other lights going on. I just wish it had more granular controls for tinting the scene with colours. You can activate several effects that run the image through a bunch of preset styles, but none of them add the subtle amount of blue I need for it to feel cold. This is exactly where a fan-made mod could step in and solve my problem, and I might try one eventually. As it is, I like working with the constraints.

Action shots are harder to pull off, and not just because they'll get you killed. Combat in *Cyberpunk* is so erratic; it's hard enough trying to pause the game the moment something looks cool. I imagine that's why you can access a bunch of action poses for V. But I want the real thing.

Quicksaves are your friend here, and I would like to personally thank whoever added the option to let you nudge V around if she isn't quite where you want her. More photo modes need that feature. It's the only way you can massage all the chaos of *Cyberpunk*'s firefights into something that looks distinct.

At this point, I've developed an eye for what works and doesn't work as a screenshot in *Cyberpunk*, and I'm eager to learn even more. *Phantom Liberty*'s new missions aren't helping me keep my finger off the photo mode button, however. Your first real meeting with Elba's character, Solomon Reed, he's pacing back and forth in a dark room with strips of light coming in through the blinds wrapped around him. It's extremely noir and, yes, I spent 30 minutes there trying to frame it like that. ■

LEFT: Dialogue scenes are often set in beautiful locations where the screenshots basically take themselves.



QUAKE II

Revisiting id's classic in the wake of the remaster. *By Rick Lane*

Quake II has a fascinating legacy. Released only 18 months after *Quake* in December 1997, it was quickly celebrated as the best game ever made. And I mean the best. PC Gamer awarded it a score of 96, only the second game in the magazine's history to receive such a dizzying number. A technological marvel, it offered a far more focused adventure than the original's dimension-hopping escapades, with a distinctive setting and consistent enemy design. It even had something id co-founder John Carmack had previously dismissed as superfluous to a good shooter: a plot.

Over time, however, *Quake II*'s reputation has diminished. The following year, its narrative ambitions were superseded by *Half-Life*, which told a better story in a more interesting fashion. More recently, critics have pointed out that its shooting experience is flatter and more sluggish than the 1996 original, while its setting and level design lack the same weirdness and imagination. David Szymanski, creator of the retro-shooter *DUSK*, has described *Quake II* as "the worst id game".

In the wake of Nightdive Studios' recent remaster, which overhauls *Quake II* for modern machines, the debate over the significance of id's sequel has arisen once more. But the remaster also provides a chance to reappraise *Quake II*. What's interesting is not which of these two viewpoints is correct, but how both are equally supported by the game.

Whatever *Quake II*'s own ambiguities, there's no questioning the brilliance of Nightdive's work remastering it. Not only has Nightdive updated the game to make the best of modern PCs, supporting 4K resolutions, widescreens, enhanced multiplayer support and more, it also supports your ideal version of *Quake II*. The remaster supports a whole host of visual modernisations like bloom lighting, dynamic shadows, antialiasing, and enhanced character models. Alternatively, you can turn all this off, switch on CRT simulation and play like it's Christmas Day 1997.

FLEXIBLE MAKEOVER

It's a wonderful, flexible makeover, and its improvements do help communicate some of what made *Quake II* such a phenomenon at the time. First and foremost are The Strogg, *Quake II*'s twisted cyborg adversaries. *Quake II*'s overarching fiction of space marines fighting a race of alien cyborgs may feel a little tired after two decades of similarly-plotted games, but the Strogg's

NEED TO KNOW

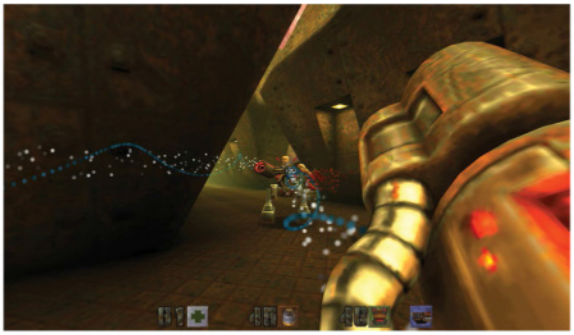
RELEASE December 7, 1997	**DEVELOPER** id Software, Nightdive
PUBLISHER Bethesda	**LINK** bethesda.net

Flying enemies are rarely fun to fight, but *Quake II*'s aren't terrible.

LEFT: The chaingun could use a little more oomph, but it does mince enemies nicely.

ABOVE: I've heard of firing blind, but this is ridiculous.

RIGHT: Big gun. Bigger skybox.



dilapidated, ad-hoc cybernetics that resemble the result of catapulting a body into a scrapheap, help the game maintain some flavour of its own.

Indeed, one of the toughest challenges in FPS design is creating enemies that are both imaginative in presentation, but also satisfying to fight. With the Strogg, id struck a perfect balance, giving players recognisably humanoid enemies, but with countless variations that all behave in different ways. Taking on a melee-focussed Berserker presents a substantially different challenge from dodging the shoulder-rockets of a heavily armoured Tank. Some enemies I'd completely forgotten about, like the Mutant, one of the few opponents that isn't a cyborg, and the Brains, a particularly unnerving cyborg that answers the question "What if WALL-E got infected by John Carpenter's The Thing?"

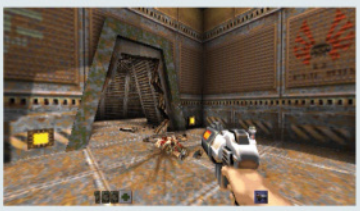
But the Strogg's most notable characteristic is how reactive they are to damage. Blast a guard onto the ground with your shotgun, and they might take one last potshot at you as they expire. Shoot the head off one of the bulky enforcers, and they spray the area wildly with their chaingun arm before collapsing. These detailed animations represented a huge step forward in 1997, and the feature that struck me as the most noticeable step forward when I first played it around its original release. Even today, few shooters afford their cannon fodder such bespoke, imaginative deaths.

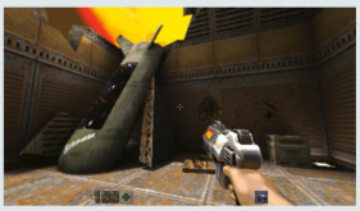
These grisly ends don't exist in isolation, either. One of the more striking things about returning to *Quake II* is just how horrible the Strogg world is. This is clear enough in its desolated, brown environments and the Strogg's brutal approach to creating new cyborgs, mercilessly chopping up humans with sawblades

FEW SHOOTERS AFFORD THEIR CANNON FODDER SUCH BESPOKE DEATHS

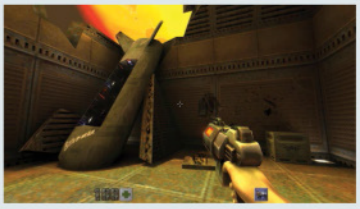
OLD DOGS VERSUS NEW TRICKS

Quake II's remaster lets you make the game look as old or new as you want

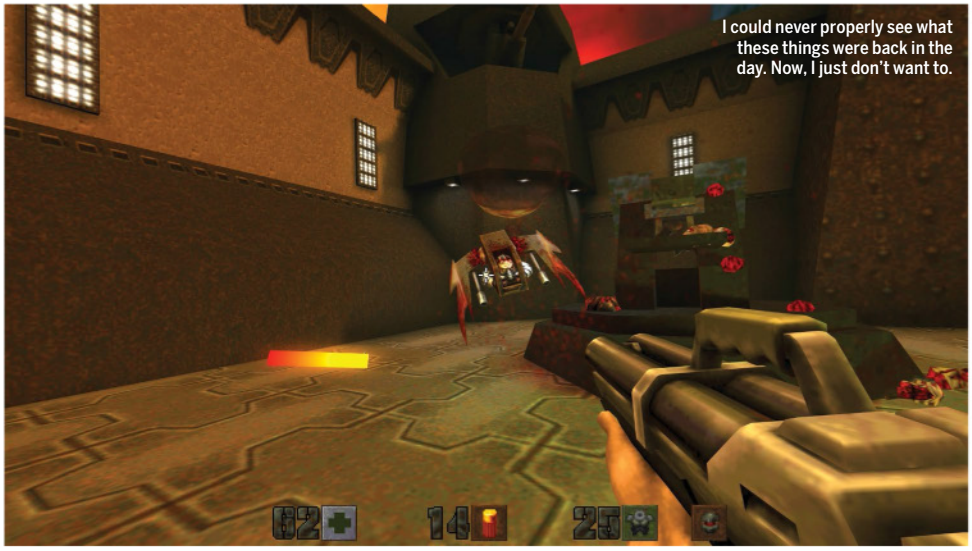


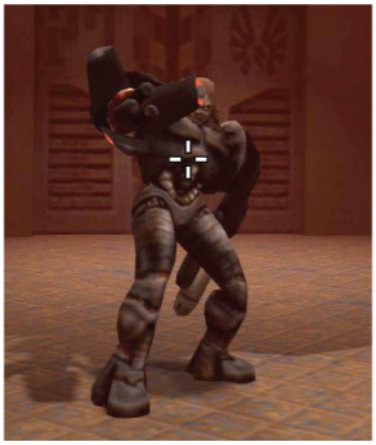


BASIC
Quake II with everything except CRT simulation switched off.



ADVANCED
Quake II with everything except CRT simulation switched on.


I could never properly see what these things were back in the day. Now, I just don't want to.



LEFT: Dodge this.

ABOVE: Dynamic shadows add an extra moodiness to some areas.

and lasers. You can imagine the overwhelming smell of iron oxide as your press through rusting facilities smeared with the blood of your fellow marines. But it isn't the sights or scents of Stroggos that lingers in your mind, it's the sound. The compressed screams of Berserkers as they die, the shuddering moans of your imprisoned comrades turned mad through torture, the buzzing flies that surround a Strogg corpse after it's laid for a while in the alien sun. *Quake II* isn't a scary game, but its monstrously unpleasant world can be thoroughly unsettling.

While the Strogg remain a compelling foe, *Quake II*'s arsenal has aged less well. A few of the weapons still hold up. The super shotgun rightly earns its name, packing a double-barrelled blast that will put a serious dent in most Strogg armour. *Quake II* also introduces the series' defining weapon, the railgun. *Quake III*'s railgun may be more famous for enabling multiplayer frags, but the corkscrew trajectory of *Quake II*'s slugs gives the older game's iteration a more distinctive appearance. Gibbing multiple guards with a single slug also never ceases to thrill.

Most of the other weapons, however, are either slightly or seriously underpowered. The chaingun and hyperblaster are both effective at shredding enemies into strogghetti, but they'd equally benefit from extra kick. The machine gun is still limper than a three-legged possum, while the shotgun is so ephemeral that you're never inclined to use it once you acquire its sibling.

Quake II's greatest weakness, however, is its level design. With the sequel, id Software wanted to create a more believable world than previous id games, with objective-oriented levels that designed as recognisable, functional places. Unlike previous id games, many of these levels are connected together to form Units, with you often travelling to and from a central hub level to several side-maps where secondary objectives are completed. The Jail unit, for example, includes a Detention Centre where prisoners are held, a Guard House that serves as the Strogg barracks, and the Torture Chamber is self-explanatory.

It's fascinating just how precisely *Quake II* straddles the line between the classic mazes of *Quake* and the more 'realistic' approach of *Half-Life*. You can almost see the transition happening as you prowl the game's many gun-metal corridors. Unfortunately, id's attempt to hammer the abstractions of classic FPS design into something more grounded results in many of levels looking quite samey. They're still fun spaces to navigate, and there are a few areas that stick in the mind, but for each one there are ten brown warehouses filled with brown crates.

FUNDAMENTALS

The limitations of *Quake II*'s maps becomes more apparent when you

IT'S ME, STROGGO!

Quake II *enemies you'd forgotten about*

MUTANT
The Mutant is a non-cyborg enemy that resembles the Fiend from *Quake*, which is why it's such an odd surprise to encounter on Stroggos.

BRAINS
Appearing toward the end of *Quake II*'s campaign, the Brains look so unpleasant you positively can't wait to forget about them.

MEDIC
Easy to forget because he appears intermittently in *Quake II*, you'll recall the bastard when he resurrects the Strogg you've just killed.

Deep down, he just wants a hug.

boot up the remaster's new episode, *Call of the Machine*. Developed by *Wolfenstein: The New Order* creators MachineGames, *Call of the Machine* takes *Quake II*'s fundamentals and uses them to build more elaborate levels stuffed with challenging set pieces. Instead of encountering one or two enemies in every corridor, MachineGames build roomier, more arena-like environments where you'll battle dozens of foes, all carefully selected to press you in new and interesting ways.

Admittedly, MachineGames has a significant advantage in today's more permissive technology. Some of the levels in *Call of the Machine* would have brought the average PC to its knees back in 1997. But *Call of the Machine* also much better understands how to build encounters around specific weapons or enemy types. In particular, *Call of the Machine* is a railgunner's delight, regularly funnelling you through tight corridors stuffed with weaker enemies just desperate to be gibbed, or placing Gunners on distant, elevated platforms that require a precisely planted slug to take down.

Call of the Machine is intense and frenetic in a way *Quake II*'s campaign rarely is. Yet while not entirely successful, *Quake II*'s Units are nonetheless an important landmark in FPS design. *Half-Life* is often characterised as a revolutionary moment in the history of the shooter, a completely unanticipated event that shook the whole industry. But *Quake II* shows the ideas *Half-Life* executed so brilliantly were very much in the water at the time. *Quake II* might not thread together its levels in a contiguous way. But it nonetheless succeeds in making Stroggos feel like a specific and coherent place, one that has grimly logical reasoning behind its form and function.

QUAKE II FELT TANGIBLE, BELIEVABLE IN A WAY NO SHOOTER EVER HAD BEFORE

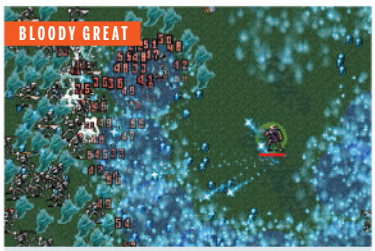
And while the game's premise is trite by today's standards, the execution still holds up in a lot of ways. The satellite-view briefing cutscenes that fill the gap between missions, presumably influenced by Westwood's work on *Command & Conquer*, are a great way of contextualising your progression without getting in the way of the action. Similarly, the framing of your adventure around specific objectives, rather than simply finding your way to the end of the maze, effectively communicates your role in undermining the Strogg war effort. Although you only ever glimpse the broader war around you, you nonetheless feel like part of something greater than yourself.

Rather than being a singular event, Valve's shooter was just another step down a path that games like *Quake II* and *Duke Nukem* were already traversing. In that context, it's much easier to see where *Quake II*'s exuberant reception came from. Its reactive enemies, its more narrative driven campaign, its interconnected levels designed to resemble a place, all of these were significant advancements in FPS design.

Quake II felt tangible, believable in a way no shooter ever had before. Nobody was to know that something even more realistic lurked beneath the deserts of New Mexico, ready to be unleashed a year later. Today, *Quake II* might represent an intriguing evolutionary link between *Quake* and *Half-Life*. But for a few months in the rapidly changing development scene of the 1990s, it was the most advanced shooter anyone had ever made. ■

FRASER BROWN

Here's what I've been playing while stuck in my bed with only my Steam Deck for company. Perfect games for when you're feeling poorly, or just don't want to sit at your PC.



VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

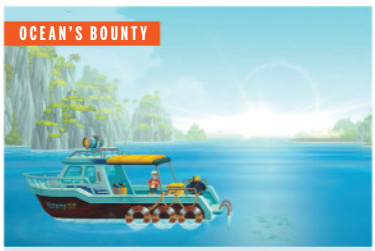
bit.ly/46VPTIW

Bullet hell perfection, *Vampire Survivors* fills the screen with anarchic joy as you try to survive and rack up an impressive score. Despite its roguelike sensibilities, it actually wants you to live long enough to develop godlike powers and become an unstoppable force of destruction.

METAL GEAR SOLID V: PHANTOM PAIN

bit.ly/46GOr75

Come for Kojima's patented nonsense, stay for one of the tightest stealth games around. I bounced off this one halfway through the first time around, but the mix of open-world wandering and digestible missions makes it really shine on the Deck. I've been converted.



DAVE THE DIVER

bit.ly/3s7dG3j

A chill restaurant management romp spliced with a fish-hunting scuba adventure, *Dave the Diver* has all the vibes of a relaxing holiday, even when you're fighting sharks. It's charismatic, and it's amazing how it manages to fit in so many features without ever getting flabby.

DEAD RISING 2: OFF THE RECORD

bit.ly/471MHF3

This 'non-canon' *Dead Rising* entry is also the best one. The presence of a timer that forces you to take meds and kills off survivors if you don't reach them in time is stress-inducing, but mostly you'll be finding creative ways to re-murder zombies while wearing funky costumes.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Fraser Brown

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

beth.games/3saxx1u

Despite not being Verified on the Deck, *Skyrim* is one of my handheld faves now. The leisurely pace and simple combat mechanics are a boon here, and with only a bit of faffing you can still cram in plenty of mods. Even after 12 years, it's worth jumping back in.

OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED

bit.ly/40baEaX

A killer management sim, *ONI* manages to straddle the line between stressful and whimsical as you attempt to build colonies and keep your clones alive through a constant cavalcade of crises. Despite its complexity, it's all presented in such a way that it works beautifully.

DISCO ELYSIUM

bit.ly/3S6MNHs

One of the best RPGs ever made, this is the perfect game for a Deck session thanks to its measured pace and simple but elegant mechanics. Just stay in bed all day as you try to recover a detective's lost memories and solve a murder – all while trying not to die in embarrassing ways.

STELLARIS

bit.ly/3Q8BpII

Since 2016 *Stellaris* has grown into a stupidly gargantuan 4X where every sci-fi fantasy sits side-by-side, so it's kinda incredible that it works pretty well on the Deck. Going full Borg on the galaxy while you're on the train or having a lazy day is especially satisfying.

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Designing Generic Doom Clone 367

How not to create an iconic FPS

Guys, I had a seriously prophetic brainwave for an epic new game at 2:38am last night after eating that footlong sub that had been left under the radiator. With this FPS our game studio is going to go down in history!

Setting

Nondescript alien world is a must, guys. Like something an AI art generator has spat out when you've typed in 'alien world, five suns, dust storm'. What's key is it should look weirdly smeary at all times.

Protagonist

We all know that a common, gruff-looking white male is what this masterpiece needs. White male must be depicted with gun pointing at the viewer's face in all advertising material. Must look like all other white male game heroes.

Weapons

Right, what I'm about to say will probably shock a lot of you greener devs on the team, but, get this... how about we include a bland looking, weak sounding shotgun in this future Game of the Year?! I know, guys, I know, this is why I'm the top dog at the studio.

Enemies

Generic, roughly humanoid aliens, natch. Female aliens must be sexy for some reason. Think Shatner's Star Trek. Important note, female aliens must not be too sexy! We've got to keep things classy after all.

Gameplay

Get this, our FPS will be just one long enforced corridor! No arenas. No differing routes. No secrets to find. Just corridor. Lots of backtracking though the corridor, though, please. We all know choice in games is overrated.

Tech

Just so we're bang on the zeitgeist, I want framedrops, clipping, animation glitches, as well no DLSS and ultra widescreen support. Yes, we will include a 4K fidelity mode, but let's ensure it drops the framerate below 13fps at all times.

Advertisement

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RACE
WIN
REPEAT
MAKE WAY
OUT NOW
STEAM
ICE BEAM
SECRET MODE